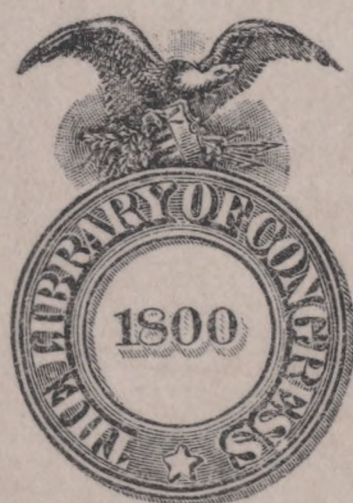


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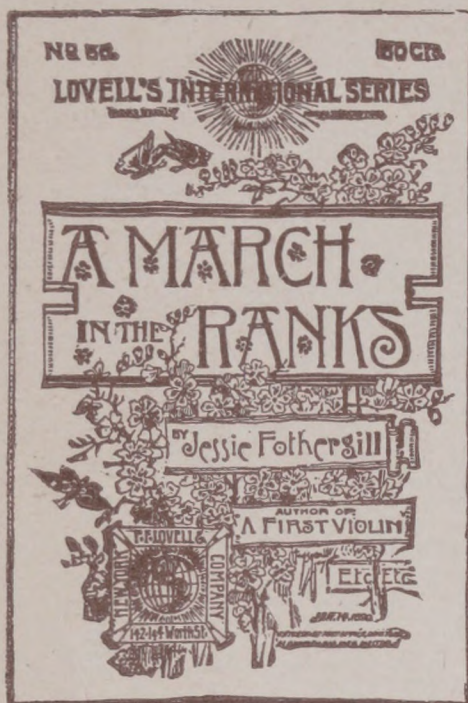


BY

Mabel Collins

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY,

150 WORTH ST. COR. MISSION PL.
NEW YORK.



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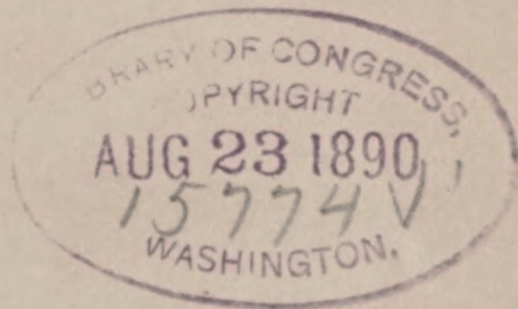
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THE CONFESSIONS OF A WOMAN

THE CONFESSIONS OF A WOMAN

BY
MABEL (COLLINS.) *Cook*

20
The burden of sad sayings. In that day
Thou shalt tell all thy days and hours, and tell
Thy times and ways and words of love, and say
How one was dear and one desirable,
And sweet was life to hear and sweet to smell.
But now with lights reversed the old hours retire,
And the last hour is shod with fire from hell.
This is the end of every man's desire.



NEW YORK
JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY
150 WORTH ST., COR. MISSION PLACE

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PREFACE.

MAY I be permitted, in one respect, to disarm the critics of this sketch, by pointing out that the views expressed in it, the theories, and the conclusions arrived at, are not in any sense whatever my own. They are those of Mrs. Ashton Harcourt : the sad product of a sad age, whose mind I have studied and depicted as clearly as lies in my power, for the information of such readers as may be interested in her.

MABEL COLLINS, London, 1890.

THE CONFESSIONS OF A WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

I WONDER if I can interest you, my reader? Perhaps you will not be interested in my story, perhaps you will not like it; I do not so much mind that, if I can interest you in myself. It is the old craving, the longing for sympathy, the hunger to be understood, which has been the misery of my life. No one ever has understood me; but now I am going to try and explain myself, to put every thought and feeling upon paper. Very likely I shall be just as much of an enigma then; perhaps you will not understand me at all. If I understood myself doubtless I should no longer find any interest in the study of my own character. I am certainly a mystery to myself; the greatest psychological problem in the universe. If I could once take a firm grasp of my own motives, then I might begin to study other persons. But the old philosophers said "Know thyself," and I have devoted ten years of thought to the attempt to obtain this knowledge, and have not succeeded. I am determined now to tell all I know, and possibly some one else may put the puzzle together.

I know I am an exceptional woman in some respects ; but I am convinced that the great tides of emotion which govern my life control the lives of others also. Human nature must be similar in its fundamental characteristics ; and yet there are some things—articles of faith, of conviction—that have left me forever, and which I once thought were the ineradicable possession of all human beings. To take one instance : the distinction between right and wrong. Do not close the book in a hurry when I say this, even you that have that distinction marked in your mind most definitely. I do not want to shock you ; I want to awake your sympathy. I am expressing a cry from my heart, I am telling the fierce and terrible truth. I have lost many of my old landmarks, and grope round vainly in search of others to take their place. There are none.

When I was a bride my husband found me one day reading Epictetus.

“ If you learn to think,” he said, “ you will be miserable all your life. Take my advice and refuse to think.”

I made no answer. I had begun to think, and nothing could stop me. My mind is often abnormally active, and wears out my body ; but I cannot help it. If I could live in the activity of my mind altogether I should not care ; but I cannot. The body recovers, the senses awake, and I pass through another phase of experience which leaves me yet again in a state of greater mental perplexity than before. Then it is that I go back to my Epictetus. Stoic philosophy is a holdfast when nothing

else is ; when religion, and metaphysics, idealism and emotion, are all exhausted. Exhausted (in my case) not from satiety, but thrown aside because they do not satisfy. That is the truth of it. I am still young, but I feel a thousand years old now, for I am a woman with a history, a woman who has lived through a series of romances ; and I have never been in love in my life. I do not yet know what love is.

My father died when I was a baby, and I was brought up by my dear mother, the tenderest, sweetest, most lovable woman that ever lived. She educated me, and kept me in the shelter of our country home, so that I grew up like a flower, innocent, happy, ignorant. Ah, that gay young life of mine, what long ages ago I seem to have lived it ! That halcyon age when I had not begun to get puzzled, when life held no difficulties for me, when I had not even thought of considering my own nature. I learned and accepted as absolutely final certain facts which my dear mother impressed on me as solid verities. I was taught Christianity, and went to church every Sunday with as easy a conscience as the birds that built on the church tower. I never imagined that there existed for anybody the possibility, or, rather, the need of understanding the Athanasian Creed, or the doctrine of the Trinity. I was brought up to regard marriage as my profession, though of course the idea was never expressed in that way. It was conveyed to me subtly, poetically even. The innate purity of a young girl's mind was spoken of before me, as being a thing of the highest value, which must be preserved at

any cost. My future was represented to me, indirectly, as something very delightful ; I was sure to meet a man I should love, and marry him and be happy ever after ; and, what is more, be always one of the noble army of pure and virtuous women. Oh, those words ! How they haunt me now ! They are beautiful words, but *do they mean anything?* I ask you again, and implore you not to answer me or yourself hastily—do they mean anything? What is that innate purity of a girl's mind, which her husband can sweep away in one week of intimate association? Is it purity, or is it, after all, only ignorance? I have come to think so ; but I may be wrong. When I was a girl my opinions were as solid as rocks, and could not be shaken ; now, alas, I alter them very often.

But, though I have been through mire, and touched pitch, I believe my mind to be as pure, in the absolute sense, as it ever was. How that is to be reconciled with the fact that I have lost the power of distinguishing between right and wrong, I cannot tell you.

Two great passions have dominated my life ; one is for art, the other the craving to be loved, to know what love is. No doubt I am a sensuous creature ; if I were not, I could not take the place as an artist that I do. People often say that allowances must be made for people with genius ; that they are different from the rest of the world. It is certain that I possess some of the divine afflatus ; if I had not been able to rush into creation when experience sickened me, I could not have lived till now in this arid world. Phases of creation

and of experience sweep over me successively ; I cannot both live myself and make something else live. It is because I am experiencing now, living my own life, that I have time to write all this down. My studio is dim and gloomy ; I sit by the flickering fire and write. I am not used to writing, and shall probably tell my story very badly ; but I mean to tell it now I have begun. I have lived very much in the world, among people ; I have tried to unravel the puzzle of life from studying human nature. Now I do not go into the world but feed upon my solitary thoughts. I think I am learning a little now, looking back. Yet I doubt it ! Ah, me, how tired I am of trying to learn ! It is that, I think, which makes me so lonely. I had forgotten to say that yet, but it is one of the most visible features of my life. I stand utterly alone in the world. No one really knows anything of my life ; no one really knows why I suffer or why I am glad. Is everyone so lonely I wonder ? They do not seem so, when I talk to them. With women whose lives have been sad or tragic there is generally some gleam of comfort, some interest which fills their days, some duties that must be attended to : a helpless child, an old mother, a sick husband. Many people habitually talk of illness as an affliction ! Such people must lead the most superficial lives. To those who have suffered, and continue to suffer, an illness is like a boon. My own severe illnesses, as I look back on them, seem like places of deep rest ; while I was on the verge of the grave it did not matter at all that I could not tell right from wrong, I was free from the

ceaseless sense of responsibility which has never left me, when conscious, since the unlucky day when I began to think.

When I was sixteen I had my first lover ; a lover whom I never listened to, and yet he left an indelible mark on my life. How happy I was in my ignorant, upspringing youth, before he ever spoke to me ! I had my passionate dreams of art then to live for ; my love of nature to make me always gay. My mother would have been horror-stricken could she have guessed that I should ever become a professional artist, as I am now, for she belonged to the old school which admitted none but fireside virtues and domestic capacities for women. But she had also the old school admiration for "accomplishments." I was taught everything that girls are supposed to learn. I cared for nothing but reading and painting. I had plenty of books, but they were selected so as not to disturb the purity of my mind. I gathered from the books I read, among other erroneous impressions, the fixed idea that love between a man and a woman is an eternal fact ; that, once existing, it must always exist, not only through time but beyond it. If I had not been given quite so lofty an ideal of life, I could not have suffered quite so much from disillusionment. I put forward this suggestion very timidly. But I cannot help pitying from my very heart girls I see educated in the same way. Because they look for something which can never be found. Marriage means to them disillusionment and often despair. If they did not look for anything ideal

in the man they are to marry, or the life they are to lead with him, the disappointment would be much less. I am glad I have no children ; if I had a daughter to educate I should be torn to pieces with doubt about this question.

As I was allowed to read, so I was allowed to paint ; that is, as much as I liked within certain limits. My passion was for the human face and form ; but I could only get village children as models, and soon grew tired of them. So I fell back upon the inevitable landscape sketching, which left my heart empty. I never could paint landscape. All I learned from my masters at this time was how to mix colors.

This first lover of mine, of whom I just spoke, was an amateur artist of great ability. He lived near us in a beautiful old house known as " The Court." It was the most artistic, charming place, full of beauty and with grounds about it that I loved dearly. Its owner, Paul Phayre, was a man of about thirty, a bachelor without any near relations. My mother liked him to visit us, and help me understand my work, as he did, immensely. I feel sure now that she saw his passion from the first, and would have been glad for me to marry him. For he was rich, of good family, and a true gentleman. I don't know why he had never married, unless it was the truth he told me : that he had never loved before. I did not think much of the statement at the time, because it annoyed me very much that he should love me. I had delighted in him as a friend ; but I did not want a lover—especially one so terribly in earnest as

he was. I understood none of his feelings then ; but I have suffered now, and know something, and when I look back my heart aches for Paul. I can see plainly the blank, bitter, hopeless look there was on his face when I shrank from him. I have very often been called heartless since, by men who could not understand me ; that was the only time in my life when I deserved the word. I was heartless from sheer ignorance. Paul, as I know now, had suffered from the pain that has always been mine ; from the emptiness of life ; the lack of interest. Poor fellow, his intense passion for me had come to his heart like rain on parched ground. It had given him something to hope for and live in. It was all swept away from him by my almost indignant rejection. When I had spoken he looked long at me, but said no more. He had always likened me to a lily ; and he used to call me Lily, so that my mother picked it up, and I have been called by it ever since. He gave me the name because I was so tall and straight, because my face was so colorless, looking waxen white in the frame of my black hair. I was beautiful then ; my beauty is not beauty in my eyes now, nor do I think it is so to others. My appearance is so remarkable that people think I must be beautiful because I attract so much attention. But that is not the reason. I have a magnetic power which attracts persons to me. I am sure of that. It is most often used unconsciously ; but I can use it at will also. Persons who are prejudiced against me yield to it in time. As to my beauty !—I am sick of the sad white face, the great, hungry,

intensely black eyes, the heavy masses of hair I see in the glass. But when Paul asked me to be his wife I was indeed as lovely as a lily.

I refused him, as I say, almost indignantly. For I felt as if he was wilfully spoiling our happy friendship by such silly ideas. Ah, me, the profound, bottomless ignorance of a girl of sixteen—such a girl as I was—I could not measure his love, or gauge his character! I threw away a priceless gift without a thought! I fancy now that with Paul lay the only chance of happiness that has ever come to me in my life. I might, perhaps, if I had married him, have gone through the world untroubled, untormented, a happy wife and mother, with my religion and ethics all remaining as firm as they were then. Could this have been possible? Do circumstances make us, or do we make circumstances? This brings one round to the weary old question of fate and freewill! Well, I think character makes circumstances; it has been so with me. And yet I have been dogged by a resolute Nemesis, followed by fate. Can I believe in fate? Can I be a fatalist? No, because I can mould my own future, elevate my life, purify my atmosphere. If I did not believe that, I could not go on.

But at that time I only obeyed my impulses and feelings, without attempting to analyze or check them. I sent Paul away with a look of agony in his eyes, and I myself was very cross all the rest of the day—chiefly because I missed his companionship. He left the court almost immediately and went to Paris, where he had a

pied à terre. I believe he lived there for the next three months. At the end of that time a letter came from him to me. I shall never forget the storm of conflicting emotions that letter roused in me. I had never dreamed, in my hitherto peaceful life, that it was possible to feel so acutely, to be so bewildered by feeling. It was the first awaking of my nature, and it seemed to utterly throw me off my balance. I lost my first landmark then ; a superficial one, certainly, but still a landmark. I had always supposed that beautiful girls went through life loftily, retaining an ideal calm, however much their knights might suffer. And here was I suddenly in a whirlpool of feeling because of a letter from a rejected lover.

But he was dying ; that was some excuse for me. Paul was dying ; he had only a day or two to live ; and he implored me with such fervor as a man might use towards a saint, to come to him and let his eyes rest on my face once again before they closed forever. Who could resist such an appeal ? Not I. People have told me since that it must have been pure, foolish Quixotism which guided my actions then. Perhaps so ; I fancy I am something of a Don Quixote in petticoats. I have raved against the injustice which is done in this world ever since I have lived in it, and it has all come to little else but tilting at windmills.

Paul's letter brought a certain fact into prominence which had never been recognized before. I had a much stronger will than my mother, though I had never guessed it. The impulsive Don Quixotism of my nature

was roused by this letter ; I declared that I must and would go to Paul, and carried matters with so high a hand that, in spite of my mother's doubts and hesitations, we started for Paris that same day.

Poor Paul, I don't know to this hour what he died of, for no one told me at the time, and I must own I was too startled by the evident presence of death to ask any questions or feel any curiosity. The only thing I realized was that Paul, who had for so long been a fact in nature to me, a true, kindly, trusted friend, was being blotted out from the canvas of life. He was far gone when we reached him, and only had brief intervals of consciousness, though it was not till three days later that he died.

It was on the afternoon of the third day after our arrival. We were in the small *salon* from which his bedroom opened, when the doctor came out very softly, his eyes a little dimmed.

"It is over," he said.

I burst out into a fit of sobbing that was like laughter. I saw him look at me with a horrified expression.

"Oh, child, don't laugh like that," said my poor mother.

"Let me go in to him," I exclaimed trying to pass the doctor who had paused on the threshold of the chamber of death.

"Never !" he answered authoritatively, carried away by sudden anger. "You shall not go in to laugh at him as he lies there dead. Heartless, cruel coquette that you are. A broken heart had much to do with Paul Phayre's death ; I understand it now, if he had given it

to you. Well, you have got all you wish ; all he had is yours, and you are not troubled with him."

My mother came between us, white and trembling. "Oh, doctor," she exclaimed, "don't speak like that to her ! She has not heard anything about what he has left her, and she is such a child she doesn't know the meaning of death."

"A child, indeed," muttered the doctor, "I should call her a full-fledged jilt."

I fixed my eyes on him in paralyzed amazement. What did he mean ? It was not till long afterwards that I realized how my girlish coquetry had led Paul to think I loved him. He had never blamed me, knowing my ignorance, but his delirious ravings had left a strange impression on the doctor's mind. Perhaps this strange impression, so far from the truth, so unjust, as it seemed to me, was after all the just and true. Perhaps this doctor who had judged me second-hand, uninfluenced by my personal presence, had judged me rightly. I have studied the Indian philosophies, since then, in the course of my desultory reading ; and I have often thought they must be correct in describing everything phenomenal as illusion. How like a dream, how horribly unreal, actual life is sometimes, when one is living in the fierce action of brain or heart. It was so then ; the doctor, with his harsh words, seemed to me like a phantom talking folly ; while I was living in a reality—the overwhelming sense had come to me now that he was dead, of how intensely Paul Phayre had loved me. A broken heart ! Was it possible ? Had I broken his heart ? Who can tell ? I cannot.

CHAPTER II.

THE paroxysm of emotion which I passed through seemed to bring me in contact with Paul's very self. I awoke from the swoon in a quite different state of mind ; I seemed to realize and know the passionate, fervid love which Paul had felt for me. I longed to feel it myself, and to mourn for him as for a dead loved one. But I could not ; my heart was empty of anything but grief that he should have felt so much and so cruelly. From that moment the idea of love became a passion in my life. I wanted to feel it, I wanted to know it—I wanted to understand it.

Oh, the folly of our desires ! This one took hold of me, and led me to do things which otherwise I should never have thought of doing. When I had recovered sufficiently, my mother told me that Paul had left me everything—his fortune, the Court, and all in it ; even the rings from his fingers he had put into her hands to give to me. He had told her of his will, and begged her not to refuse the bequest or let me do so ; that he had no relative he cared for, and that it would make him happy to leave me independent of all circumstances or misfortunes. “For,” he said to my mother, “there is more passion than peace for my Lily ; she is as pure as the driven snow, but she has the brain of a man, and

none can tell where this may lead her or how she may be misunderstood. I should like to leave her all the help I can to face the world with."

I have thought very often—perhaps every day—of that speech since my mother told it me. It was enigmatic to me then ; I understand it now, and know that Paul more nearly comprehended my character than anyone else has ever done. And I have often thought how unworldly that speech showed him to be ; and how fond and foolish my mother showed herself to be in yielding to his wish.

When we came back from Paris and took possession of the Court we found ourselves boycotted. Our old friends and neighbors looked the other way when we met them in the street ; the county people, who always had regarded the owner of the Court as a person of importance, looked through us with eye-glass or pince-nez, without seeing us. My poor mother turned white every time this happened. At last she spoke out.

"I never thought it would be so bad as this," she said. "Of course I knew they would all suppose you had been engaged to Paul, but I never thought of anything worse. I suppose it is that wretched affair of our going to him in Paris."

I looked at her in complete amazement and bewilderment. I had not the smallest idea of what she meant. Meeting my perplexed gaze she said, "Think nothing about it, Lily ; it doesn't matter." And I soon forgot the puzzle. In this case it is certain that ignorance was bliss. I was in an unhappy state, wondering

what were the mysteries of life that lay before me ; a state common enough to girls on the brink of womanhood. But I kept down this vague distress by a fierce phase of work which carried me through a long, quiet winter, during which we saw no visitors at all. I used Paul's painting room, which was admirably lighted and fitted ; and when my mother came to look on at my painting we used often to talk of Paul, in low, hushed voices. We had little else to think of, so shut in and secluded were our lives. I painted my visions during those months ; the pictures (if so one may call them) still stand against the wall in the studio. It is curious to look at them and remember what I was when I painted them ; how self-absorbed, how full of idealism and dreams and Quixotic fancies. When the spring came I saw my mother wear a very serious face. She did not tell me till afterwards that she had several times found me in a profound swoon, with a chill dew on my face. When I awoke I invariably said that I had seen Paul, and had tried to follow him where he went. This alarmed her so much that she determined I should be got away from the Court for some time ; and after much hesitation decided on doing what she had intended to leave for a year later—taking me to London and “bringing me out.” I learned later on that she was a little cowardly about it, and had wished for delay because she dreaded the scandal about me following us into London society. Of course it did, though I did not even understand what it was until much later.

I was not sorry to leave the Court for a time, for

our life had grown very monotonous. My mother had a younger sister who had married a Scotch laird, and lived with him the greater part of the year in their highland fastnesses. She had no girls, her two children were boys. She was young and gay, from my mother's point of view, who always professed herself perplexed as to why Agatha should come to London every May and stay there till the end of June, going out to dinners and crushes every night that she did not receive in her own house. I was the god-child of Agatha, Lady McCleod, and was called Agatha after her. But no one, after Paul Phayre called me Lily, ever used my proper name; and I never used it as a signature except in business matters. To return—my mother wrote to Aunt Agatha and arranged that we should live together in London for the season; and that Aunt Agatha should present me at Court and “bring me out,” a proposal which delighted my dear, gay, society-loving aunt, who would have been charmed to have had daughters to take about. Aunt Agatha has been a staunch friend of mine always, from then till now; she has been the nearest woman-friend I have ever had. She has lived in the same house with me; travelled with me, seen me constantly ever since my first season; and she has never known anything at all about my life. It has all been lived aside from her, out of her knowledge. I could not help it; I detest concealment; I simply could not speak to her in my real troubles any more than I could have spoken to a child. Hers was what I suppose people mean when they speak of a pure

nature; she never thought about anything, never doubted anything. The creed she had learned as a child, the code of ethics she had been taught, have lasted unaltered to this hour, and have satisfied her fully. It has been very bitter to me, knowing how little I was like what she believed me to be, to be in her society and accept her sincere affection. Scandal has been talked about me ever since that first season—and Agatha, as I always called her—for we got to be more like sisters than aunt and niece—never believed in any of it (until a terrible day came that separated us forever) and she always defended me. One day she said to me “I believe in you as I believe in heaven.” The words cut me to the heart; I wondered—was she equally deceived in both? For I am distinctly not good, according to her simple code of ethics.

The odd thing about my life is that the scandal talked about me has always been quite unfounded. This seems odd to me, but I fancy it is a not unknown experience with others. As for me, I have done things and felt things which the people who know me would never believe me capable of; that I suppose, is just the reason why they accused me of something else. For in this world it appears that a woman cannot become noticeable in any way without being held guilty of some crime or vice.

We went to town, and found Lady McCleod already arrived, full of high spirits and happiness, and with a lovely flush of health on her face.

“Upon my word, Agatha,” said my mother. “You look ridiculously young. Just imagine if you had a couple of grown-up girls, like Lily here, to take about with you.”

“Oh, I should delight in it! I should never play the mother, but just be like a sister to them. That’s what I mean to be to Lily, who looks graver already than I have ever felt—and, dear me! she is half a head taller than I am. I assure you we can’t put this girl into a trivial tulle-and-snowdrop presentation dress; she ought to wear cloth of silver. What a stately creature it is.”

“Don’t turn her head,” said my mother severely. “You are as frivolous as ever, Agatha.”

“And always shall be,” cried Lady McCleod, and hurried away to “look after things.”

“When is your husband coming?” asked my mother, as she was at the door.

“Oh, Sandy ’ll come sometime, and show himself about with me; but Sandy hates London, and I really don’t admire heather, so we agree to differ—that’s why we’re so jolly—” and with that she vanished. It was quite true. There never was a happier couple than these two; just as I was born to live out a succession of tragedies, so they were born to go gayly through the world like two merry children. Has my character created the tragedy for me—or circumstances?—I don’t know—I cannot disentangle the two. It is fate and freewill again! the old hopeless puzzle. I have a theory of my own about fate and freewill, but I daren’t advance

it yet, lest you should think I am too fond of metaphysics. I am only metaphysical now and again ; I must explain how I think of things, just as I must speak of my art-work sometimes, or else my story would never be intelligible. But what I am endeavoring to disentangle from the medley of my life is the history of my heart ; and I shall not touch on anything else except incidentally.

I did have a cloth-of-silver presentation dress, made all soft and beautiful at its edges with white ostrich feathering. It was more like a bride's presentation dress than a young girl's ; but the great milliner we went to immediately said the same as Aunt Agatha.

“She must be dressed magnificently,” was the fiat, “or else I don't care to dress her at all. Her statuesque figure and unusual face will bear nothing else ; and if you will take my advice,” this to my mother, “you will never let her wear anything but the richest materials.”

When I tried on my splendid dress I thought of Esmond's Trix, and felt something like her too. Already the rebellion that burned in her heart was burning in mine ; for the first unjust, unfounded slander about me, that which associated me with Paul Phayre, had met me here in London. It filled me with anger and shame ; yes, I was ashamed then, of a thing I had not done ! I have never been really ashamed of anything since, either that I have done or have been supposed to have done—I have only felt curiosity and wonder. Did I wear out my capacity for shame in that early pain which I suffered so undeservedly ? or is

there no such thing as shame at all—is it, when looked in the face, only hurt vanity and anger because others despise one?—that is all I have ever discovered in my own heart even looking back upon these early days. I hardly believe in shame ; I do not see how a person can be ashamed of an action. He may not want others to know it, because their standard is different from his, and they may cry shame on him—but perhaps you will say I am making a distinction without showing a difference.

I was certainly ashamed then, of what I had not done ; my pride rebelled furiously against my being talked of, when I was so ignorant that I could not even guess what was said. If purity is ignorance I was pure then—why did not the world leave me alone, instead of repeating idle slander, and forcing me to face it with effrontery ? Why do I ask such foolish questions ? There is no justice in this world. Some of us escape “punishment” to use a horsey word ; but who can guess why those escape who do ? The problem is insoluble, because it is as evident right through the animal kingdom as in human life. Why should one carriage-horse be punished by the bearing-reins and another not ? What was that some one very great and holy—even if only legendary, still a great and holy figure—said about the sparrows ? I wish I could believe it. I love horses, and I see them unjustly ill-used every day. Why are the Whitechapel ruffians allowed to snare our precious wild birds to sell to the milliners ? Oh, these endless questions I could ask ! What is the

use of asking them when there is none to answer? I have been asking all my life, and have never found any answer.

A young horse's temper may be spoiled for life by the first groom that rides him. I entered upon life with the spur driven into me so that the blood sprang, and the bit cutting my mouth. Because I had behaved to Paul as I thought a friend ought, and because, in his unworldliness, he had thought to benefit me by his fortune, I was stamped, at seventeen, as a girl with a story—" *Something queer.*" Ah, but I was ashamed then—bitterly ashamed!

CHAPTER III.

I CREATED a *furore* that season ; I had crowds of admirers who followed me everywhere, surrounded me, waited on me, listened to my foolish words as if I were an oracle. I soon acquired a bitter way of speaking, which, in so young a girl, passed for wit ; and I was full of headstrong opinions. I said just what came into my head, caring only to attract attention and eclipse my rivals. I succeeded very well ; the newspapers got wind of my social successes, and I used to see my dresses described, and see myself called the beauty of the season. My rivals, who envied me and looked on longingly when I paraded my army of adorers before their eyes, got “ married and settled ” one by one, and I got never an offer !

I do not think with my mother and aunt Agatha that this was wholly due to the fact that I was supposed to have “ a story.” Everyone knows now that I have a story, yet it does not seem to frighten my admirers. I have no plausible theory to offer, except that, though men seem to like clever women, they do not like clever girls. There is no doubt that clever women are a fashion of this particular age, both in France and England. In America the clever girl is quite as great a

favorite. But she sees the world, and is not crude like the English girl. I was terribly crude, and very embittered; and exhibited my faults with the headstrong violence of a child. I have more energy than most people, and it was unchastened then. Whatever the reason was, no one proposed to me; and I used to hear my mother and aunt Agatha discuss the fact, which embittered me more and more. For they were quite agreed that it was the scandal about Paul which frightened the men off. I believed them, and I cannot decide now, whether they were right or wrong; but it is certain that believing them laid the foundations of my pessimism. I looked on society as my enemy; I went into it with an air of insolence, and acquired an "aloofness" of manner which I have never been able to conquer since. Well, the season was over, and my mother and aunt made no secret of their deep disappointment. With my appearance, they said, I ought to have married a Duke; there was a young unmarried Duke at that time on whom they had fixed their expectant eyes. But he did not mean to marry anybody till he had fully had his fling. I met him a little while ago, here in Paris, where I am writing, and he told me laughingly that he did not really feel he had had his fling yet. So my chances were small there, in spite of the fact that he and I were fond of each other's society. But I could not make my duennas see this: they actually talked about his having jilted me, which made me very angry indeed.

We had accepted a number of country-house invita-

tions for the late summer and autumn ; and at the very first country-house we visited I met my fate. I see no reason why I should not use that conventional phrase, because, think over it how I will, it really does seem to me that I was fated to marry Ashton Harcourt.

The oriental philosophies introduce the idea of reincarnation into all their theories of life, and the idea pleases me, because it offers plausible explanations of otherwise most perplexing facts.

If one accepts the idea it is necessary also to accept another, which is simply that actions in a previous existence produce effects in one's present life. This idea has been familiarized to English novel-readers by the Theosophists, Mr. Sinnett having even called one of his novels by the sanskrit word for it—*Karina*. I have never been able to learn much as to the way in which *Karina* is supposed to work, but the idea pleases my fancy, as a just possible explanation of otherwise inexplicable situations. Why was it (for instance) that when I sat down to the dinner table at Harleton House, and saw Ashton Harcourt sitting opposite me, did it seem as though I had known him always, was quite intimate and familiar with himself and his character? Why also did it suddenly flash into my memory that I had seen this man in dreams at intervals all through my life? Why was it that I said to myself "I believe I shall marry that man?" These things were so : that is all I can say. If re-incarnations and *Karina* are facts, I suppose Ashton Harcourt and I had either hated or loved each other very

intensely in a previous life—whether it had been hate or love I cannot guess.

Ashton fell in love with me at first sight. I must beg my reader not to laugh at me when I say that Ashton was a man who always did fall in love at first sight. For Ashton's loves were many, though of course I did not know that till long afterwards. But out of these many loves only two seriously affected his life ; his passion for me, and his passion for a woman who was my opposite in everything.

He could not take his eyes from me all the evening ; he came early to the drawing-room after dinner, got introduced to me and resolutely kept the place by my side. Ashton had a fierce will, and he always acted on impulse. He determined, in the first five minutes of our acquaintance, that I should be his wife. There is nothing extraordinary in this ; some men delight in rushing upon unknown countries of experience in this way. My father decided in exactly the same manner about my mother, and carried his day, as did Ashton.

He was a tall, deep-chested strong man, with a long soft brown beard, and eyes that changed in color from gray to green. He was not good-looking, but he was a striking figure, and he had the most perfect manners. He was quite one of the best known and most popular men in society, considering that he took no share in politics or anything else, in fact never did anything but amuse himself and other people. He had a great faculty for creating a bright, cheerful atmosphere, and people liked him for this. He did it to please himself because he disliked

anything serious or dull—synonymous words to him.

That night I woke trembling, and with a cold dew on my forehead. Little wonder—for by the dim light in the room I saw a figure standing a few yards off looking at me. That figure was myself, wrapped in the white dressing-gown that I had thrown off as I got into bed. I succeeded in moving my eyes to the chair on which I had thrown my gown ; it was not there. It was no hallucination, the figure stood there, actually dressed in the gown. I suppose it was a dream, but it made an impression on my life, such as an actual fact would make. What did it mean ? I wondered and puzzled all night long. Oh, the blessed morning, when my mother's maid came in and drew up the blind and brought me some tea ! I was prostrated, and lay wearily in bed without energy to move, or even answer my mother's anxious questions.

In the afternoon a letter was brought to me ! It was from Ashton. I have not got it ; I have long since burned every scrap of his writing I possessed. I cannot remember it all. He told me he had heard I should not leave my room that day, and that he could not endure the suspense ; that he must write and tell me how he had fallen in love with me at first sight ; that he had had the strangest dream in the night, in which he had seen me and spoken to me, and that in his dream he had taken my hand, and woke to feel my hand actually in his ; that he implored me to decide his fate at once ; that it was hardly necessary to say he had plenty of money and a good position ; that he would devote himself to making my life happy and so on, and so on. I suppose

every man has written such a letter, and every woman received one, at some time in their lives.

I let it lie on my bed till my mother came in, and then gave it her to read. It was a very passionate effusion, but it had no sacredness for me.

“What are you going to do?” asked my mother tentatively and with suppressed anxiety.

“I am going to say ‘yes,’” I replied quietly, and it seemed to me as I spoke that I again saw my own figure standing regarding me, and that it said to me, “You are going to say ‘yes.’”

“Oh, my dear, my dear, I am so thankful!” said my mother, bursting into tears, “It is a magnificent match. Everybody has tried to catch him! Oh my dear, it is a triumph, indeed!”

She could not have been more pleased if it had been that hapless little sot and rake, the Duke I have just mentioned. I think she was more pleased, for it seems Ashton was a much coveted “eligible.” I lay and looked at her in dull wonder. How far we were apart! The Atlantic would not have separated us more effectually than our different habits of thought did.

That is the one grudge I bear my dead mother. Now that she is gone from me I ought to forgive her entirely; yet I cannot forgive her letting me marry Ashton. She ought to have saved me from myself. As for me, I was in one of those strange conditions which needs a strange theory to account for it—such an one as I have just advanced. Asked by an ordinary matter-of-fact person why I married Ashton Harcourt, I should

be compelled to say that I had not the least idea, except that I gave in to his wish to marry me. I was certainly not in love with him, nor did I even fancy myself so. I simply succumbed comfortably to his passion for me.

And what a passion it was! There was something fine about it, after all, while it was at its height. He was a lover of the robust school. Nothing would induce him to agree to wait more than three months for our marriage; and during those three months he was with me all day long.

I gave myself up wholly and completely to the experience I was going through. I never went into my studio, I let everything go but the bond between myself and Ashton. He was thirty years old, a man of great experience, who had been everywhere and seen everything; his great vitality and vigor, combined with the subtle gentleness of his manner, made him a most fascinating companion. I gladly became absorbed into his life, into his passion, into his atmosphere. It was like new life to me. I believed and hoped I was on the verge of the great experience I longed for, of feeling in myself a great passion. But I was not. I was never in love with Ashton for a moment. And yet I was quite happy with him, because I loved his love for me, and lived on it. Those observers of human life who say that the woman loves the man's desire for her, certainly speak truth. What I cannot even yet discover is whether they speak the whole truth—whether woman is really in herself incapable of passion, of initiating. There

is no doubt that she can knowingly cause passion to come to life in a man over whom she has any power ; but I have doubts as to whether she can call it to life in herself. I am inclined to think she can, if she can put away the idea of conquest, and let her own nature assert itself.

My mother knew Ashton Harcourt's character ; she knew facts about him that I never learned until three years later, and yet she let me marry him without a word of warning. She let me go to him perfectly innocent, because an absolutely ignorant girl ; a romantic, high-spirited, enthusiastic girl, with an entirely ideal standard of life and conception of love.

I can never understand how any mother could do this. But I see mothers do it continually. I call it a crime, a thing to be really ashamed of. My poor mother ! that I should write down such things about her ! I cannot help it—I am determined to tell the truth ; and I sicken now when I think of how she let me go.

I was very happy during my brief engagement. Ashton gave me the full charm of his delightful social qualities, and his passion was so strong that I felt its vibrations, and a faint flush would sometimes rise in my pale face from the intensity of his feelings. I became devoted to him ; I put him in the place of my mother, of my dead father, I think of God himself. For I certainly forgot my religion with everything else. Ashton was a contented agnostic ; therefore so was I.

For I was happy in regarding him as perfect, in looking upon his word as law.

He was not only my lover, he was my all.

My all ! yes, that was the folly of it. We were married on a beautiful June day, in a fashionable London church, the air of which was heavy with the scent of flowers and of essences. Society came in full force and the presence of two royal personages made ours the most noticeable wedding of the season.

When I had taken off my gorgeous trappings of white silk and lace, and laid aside the Harcourt diamonds which had covered half the front of my bodice, and gleamed in my dark hair, I begged to be left quite alone to put on my travelling dress. I had a kind of feeling that I should never be alone again for five minutes. I was quite right ; I never was while Ashton loved me. For his love was distinctly possessive.

I crept down quietly, when I was ready, to where my mother was waiting for me. She had been called away, and I had to pass alone through some of the guests, who were thronging in the hall to see us off. People were talking so busily and merrily they did not notice or make way for me ; and as I passed, hesitating which way to turn, I overheard a piece of dialogue between two men close beside me.

“Did you ever hear anything so scandalous as that Herries woman forcing herself into that church ?” said one.

“I don’t know her by sight,” said the other, “are you sure she was there ?”

“Oh, yes, I could see her plainly, and so did a lot of people. Harcourt saw her, and turned as white as a sheet. I declare I thought there was going to be a scene.”

“Awfully hard on the poor girl!”

“What, the bride? Oh, shameful. And what a beauty she is. So’s the old love, for the matter of that, though they are different as chalk and cheese! ’Pon my word, Harcourt’s got an eye for beauty—and isn’t he lucky with the women, too!”

I moved away quietly, so that they did not see me. I went over what they had said, but could make no sense of it. We were no sooner alone in the carriage than I asked Ashton who the “Herries woman” was that I heard people talking of. He changed color visibly, but said at once that he did not know. Then he immediately began to talk to me about other things and carried me into the fool’s Paradise where I dwelt with him.

His was a passion that scorched with its intensity, that took the whole life of the woman he loved. The very strength of it, and the fact that its fierceness cut away all my other links, destroyed all my other interests, made me cling to him, and believe in him the more. My own life and individuality, my art, my own thoughts and feelings, were for the time lost sight of. I knew what it was to “suffer love.”

CHAPTER IV.

A FOOL'S paradise ! Yes, because I made a vital mistake. I knew I did not love him, but I thought he loved me—because he told me so ! How could any girl so ignorant as I was imagine that he did not mean what he said ? It takes all the experience of a woman of the world and some power of reasoning, to know that when men talk in this way they talk for the moment, and the moment only. Oh, why did Ashton marry me ? He never should have married any woman. He scorched and burned me and left my heart waste.

Now, my reader, I am going to present you with a picture which perhaps has not been given you in words before ; at all events not by a woman. Yet who but a woman should do it ? Looking back, with the help of the experience I have gathered since, I can see very clearly the situation as it was. Ashton Harcourt was a profligate, a roue, and not one who had sown his wild oats, but one who must always be sowing them. He was in love with me—he made love to me as he had made love a hundred times before. His breath burned me ; to be near him seemed like being consumed in a fire ; and he drew me to him and held me tight in his arms. I struggled for a moment with all my natural

pride, and full of fierce indignation. Suddenly I remembered—this was Ashton, my husband! Oh! how unlike my dream of love, this actual passion. I repeat, I was an ignorant and romantic girl. I do not excuse myself, but I cannot blame myself. How many ignorant and foolish girls are married in this way? I allow that some know the world—and something of the men that make it—before they marry; and for my part I think they are the fortunate ones. They at least do not suffer as I did. At last I could bear it no longer, and with all my strength pushed Ashton from me. I was like a young panther. “My God!” exclaimed Ashton as he looked into my face which grew whiter and more waxen with rage. “Your eyes are like blazing stars. Don’t push me away, child—you will drive me mad.”

We were still in the carriage: yes, I have not got beyond that—and now, as I sit here so quiet, I can feel again the fierce beatings of my heart. For the first and last time in my life I was frightened. Surely there should be a temple in every country to which such women as I was could be sworn as vestals. Mine was the virginal temperament, and I never had imagined that it must be fought down and killed and destroyed by this passionate lover of my body whom the church had made my husband. I was never a follower of any religion, because of my awkward tendency to ask unanswerable questions. I never could accept a doctrine which was merely asserted. I have been told that I ought to have been educated for science because I am always wanting proof. Still I had had a respect for the

church in which I had been brought up ; a kind of lingering feeling that “my pastors and masters” must be right. But I took a perhaps unreasonable hatred for the church which had married me, on this day. It kept recurring to my mind—the scene, the bouquets, the pretty dresses, the flower-decked altar, the music, the Bishop, the Rector, the Curate. They had made genuflexions—but was it possible, I said to myself, that they had actually done anything to change Ashton from the gentle, kind, chivalrous lover into the man that now again held me in his arms and pressed me to him—oh, it was not possible ! How little men understand women ! The men who most think they know us are the most ignorant. Ashton was what is called successful with women. Men such as he was always fancy they understand us ! They never know how we shrink from that enmity which Byron declared to be a necessary part of love. Apparently it is so to a man with whom love means passion. With us there is a longing for tender touches and magnetic kisses ; endearments which simulate love at all events. “Affect a *délicatesse*, e’en if you have it not,” is my advice to profligates. It may be difficult for them, for they grow rougher, it seems, as the years go by. But let them remember that women awaken and recognize their own powers as the years go by. It is the desire, not for fierce excitement, but for the subtleties of sensation which make the modern Lesbians and Sapphos—doubtless the same cause has always produced the same effect. For the world does not alter !—it only swings on, and civiliza-

tion rises and falls, the utmost corruption existing when the development is highest.

I was like a white lily torn from its stalk by a drunken reveller, and crushed in his hand. It sounds a very fanciful simile to use for myself; but as a matter of fact it is mere prose. I felt like that; I shrank from this fierce passion, and suddenly a kind of hatred for Ashton sprang up in my mind. This hatred terrified me—I began to fancy I must be wicked indeed—a thing I had often been told but never had believed before. We had reached Victoria and it was when Ashton handed me out of the carriage that this conviction became suddenly forced on me. For he almost lifted me out—it was only momentary but it was enough! Yes, I hated him.

I had made Ashton pledge himself beforehand not to have a locked carriage; I had such a horror of advertising to all the world the fact that we were newly married. He kept to his promise; I learned afterwards he was actually afraid to break it or else he would have done so. I would not wear a new dress in spite of my mother's and Aunt Agatha's entreaties; not I, indeed! I was too proud. I resolutely got into a carriage where there were other people and looked out of the window. How vexed Ashton was! But I wanted time to recover myself and think. Think! I found my head swimming—for, ah, the journey was so short. It came to an end and we were quickly driven to an hotel where rooms were engaged for us for that night. We were to cross by next day's boat.

A sudden savagery had taken possession of me; I

determined to assume accustomed airs and to wear none of the timidity of a bride. I rang the bell and ordered tea. It was ready and came instantly. I was longing for it—my head ached—I was tired and thirsty—yesterday Ashton would have brought it me and waited on me. But I was his wife now!

“Confound the tea!” he exclaimed, and suddenly caught me in his arms. I was so angry all power deserted me—I was numbed—but a moment later I found strength to free myself, and hurried into my room, where my maid was unpacking.

Ashton ordered her out of the room.

“How dare you!” I exclaimed—but I might as well have talked to the sun at midday and bid it not shine.

CHAPTER V.

AND that is how, from not loving my husband, I came to hate him.

I conquered the hatred afterwards, as I thought ; for his passion burned into me. But it was always latent, even in my most submissive moments.

Yes, submissive ; for every day that passed after this made my life more of a submission to his. Of course I did not understand him ; but then how should I ? It was all inevitable. I am a fatalist now. If I had been a woman of the world, or of any experience, I could have ruled Ashton by right of his passion, and I could have fed it. But as it was he ruled me by right of it. I was not a woman ; I was a child.

From the day of my marriage I began to slowly but surely alter my views of life. The world took on a totally different color. This was due to my husband's mental and moral influence over me. Some men delight in taking an ignorant mind and revealing to it the dark side of life—the vice of the world, to use the accepted expression. I am grown too confused now to be able to use the word myself honestly in its usual sense. I have known women capable of telling lies from interested motives, who led what are called absolutely virtuous lives. I have known perfectly honest and truthful

persons who were considered vicious. To my mind truth is a moral virtue, and therefore of incomparably higher value than any physical virtue. Lord Welter, in *Ravenshoe*, is a blackguard, always drinking and dicing and brawling ; but he is transformed into a magnificent figure by the great occasion on which he told the truth. He might have said nothing, and no one would have blamed him ; but this bully and ruffian was not to be so subtly tempted. His mind was simple and his conscience too ; he knew he must tell the truth.

I don't regret having made this digression here, because it is very necessary to explain that truth is a form of virtue which I clearly understand to be virtuous. Nothing has ever altered my original conviction about that. Will anything alter it? Perhaps. I cannot tell. I have suffered such changes I may yet suffer more. But I still cling to my love of truth. It may be only a love—I know not. But my devotion has cost me dear.

Ashton had certain rules of conduct, whether natural or artificial I know not, which helped greatly to make him the charming companion he was, and also to make life brighter. He never tyrannized in little things—he carried the manners of society into everyday life. He never contradicted, or argued, or laid down the law. He would never have influenced my thoughts as he did if he had resorted to any rough-and-ready methods in conversation. But by the gentlest means, the most natural, the softest, he steadily destroyed that quality in my mind which is usually called purity ;

which now I call ignorance. He darkened the world for me; he showed it to me full of vice, hypocrisy, shame. He told me things about his friends, about our mutual friends, which made me shrink from them with a horror I found it difficult to conceal sometimes. I felt as if I had lost my way and was wandering about in a society of criminals. Ashton himself was my one refuge; for he never made any confessions, or threw any light on himself; and believing I knew him thoroughly, I preferred to be alone with him to being in any other society. But I found at last that I was no nearer loving him than I had been at first; my heart was empty. Only that his love for me was an incessant occupation I might have despaired. As it was I began to believe that my dream of love was an impossible one, like my dream of virtue. Marriage had destroyed both, and I more and more resolutely gave myself up to Ashton, giving him my very self as completely as I could, submitting entirely to his pleasure. I thought then I was fulfilling an almost sacred duty; from my present point of view, it seems to me, looking back, that the three years of my married life were positively immoral. Yes, three years; it only lasted three years. During that time I had no life of my own; I lived simply in being loved. Some women live like this all their lives and believe themselves to be following a high calling. For me it lasted only this short time; but I lived it so utterly, so intensely, that I believed in it as a positive finality. I never dreamed but that it would last through time and through eternity. The secret hunger,

unacknowledged by myself, which arose from the fact that Ashton could not make me love him, and that the latent hatred of the conquered for the conqueror lurked within me, at last drove me back to my work. I think hard work is the only real anæsthetic for mental pain which exists. The opium-eater suffers from reaction, whereas real work is stimulating. Six months after my marriage I was back in my studio again! I found that I had made immense progress during my time of idleness. This is one of the great mysteries of life which every true artist encounters; a phase of experience, of downright human living, will sometimes lift one up a great way on the ladder of art. I found it so. I began to do really good work, and soon became a frequent exhibitor. Ashton encouraged me; he liked me to be admired and praised. He loved society, and we entertained very largely. He was a great favorite in the one set which considers itself to be society, and I was, if not exactly a favorite, yet a very much noticed figure in it. I never found society very interesting; I loved to talk of real things, and as I never met anyone who cared for such conversation I was very silent. But with my rapidly spreading notoriety as an artist, a different circle came round me. Artists of all kinds and all countries wished to know me; I had a public position as well as a social one. To meet this fresh development Ashton inaugurated studio evenings. Very few members of society so-called appeared on those nights, but a number of interesting people came, people that I found it possible to talk to. I sup-

pose it was about eighteen months after my marriage that Svenski came to London and came to see me. He was in the full flush of a great reputation ; he was a Pole, and the Polish people regarded him as one might a cherished aloe bloom—his greatness was to them a flowering of the nation. He was truly great—he is truly great, for death has not taken him yet from my unpeopled horizon. How well I see him now, entering my studio for the first time, coming, as he did, to pay his tribute to another artist ! Tall, very slight, at the first glance he seemed a fragile creature ; at the next you saw immense power and strength hidden behind this fragility. The most marked characteristic of his face was the inexpressible sadness which always rested on it, like a faint cloud, until something interested or roused him—then the whole face altered, and such a fierce keenness and eagerness came upon it as reminded one of a bird of prey rather than of anything else.

Svenski had come to London because he had been asked to exhibit his pictures here ; they were borrowed and begged from the various purchasers, and arranged in a gallery in Bond Street. They were exhibited there for a year, a summer season and a winter season ; and during that year Svenski and his wife and his two pretty children lived in London. We became very intimate with them. Madame Svenski was a bright young woman, a true *bon camarade*, who tried her best to lift the cloud of melancholy that hung about Svenski's life. It came from his own character, or some secret chagrin ; he was a pre-eminently successful man. I always

looked upon him as more my husband's friend than mine, for he always came to the house with that air. Nevertheless, I fully realize that he was the first person I had ever met whom I could freely and openly talk to—who caught my thought and threw it back to me enlarged or answered. I have never met his equal as a talker, because he is a really original thinker, and would literally raise a conversation, bringing out suggestions that filled one with a breathless mental excitement. Yes—let me set it down here, once and for all—Svenski is one of the truly great, one who has power to reach the golden gates, to climb to the mountain-tops of human thought, and look beyond into spiritualities.

Well, Svenski came and went ; his presence had made a great bright spot in my life ; I knew it when he had gone. Once, just before he left, I chanced to be alone with him a whole long afternoon, and we talked of many things which I have never found it possible to talk of with any one else. I did not know till much later either his feeling, or the impression I produced on him. I was very much angered and very much astonished when Aunt Agatha said to me, “ I'm glad that man is gone ; he admired you a great deal too much.” Such a suggestion made me resentful, for I felt myself secure and secluded forever in my devotion to Ashton and his constant passion for me. I called my submission to him devotion ; the word pleased me. It prevented me from disturbing the depths of my nature and raising that doubtful darkness which always lies below, as Nathaniel Hawthorne says, though not quite in these

words. How one can deceive oneself! Could I have known that the fever which burned me was anger, I should have called my submission immorality as I do now. I do not consider that the real dangers of life arise from being deceived by others, but from deceiving oneself. One does it in all innocence—but, oh, looking back, how foolish, how almost criminal it seems! One fancies one is making another person happy! One fancies one is necessary to some loved one! And all the while that person may be feeling your love a fetter. These things cannot be life-long; they are too painful. They will out at last, at some great crisis, as with me. Ashton's passion for me was like a great bar laid on my life, a thing I had bowed myself to. But I never thought it out in this way; my will held my mind from doing it. Oh, yes, I knew I hated him; but after the very first battle I had sworn allegiance to my conqueror. So do the Poles to the Russians; the Irish have done so to the English. That is all that marriage is. If promises are like pie-crust much more so are vows. To swear allegiance or faithfulness, to take a pledge of any sort, is at once to break it, either in heart or in action. This is human nature. For we are chameleons, changing every moment. It is possible for a woman, strong and resolute, to hold herself in check for many years, because she is proud. A woman who keeps her vows is proud and conscious of shame. Men are not either in these matters; and when these foolish words "till death do us part" are uttered, everyone knows it means, till pleasure brings satiety and change is needful. And this

is marriage ! a sacrament, a moral institution ! Who so restricts himself by a vow of any kind only makes a meaningless and useless martyr of himself. For if life has any meaning it is gathered by experience, which means change. And no man is to-day the same man that he was yesterday ; for the most prominent law of life is change.

CHAPTER VI.

THE change came to me !

My whole life was changed suddenly—changed as is a mass of snow when it melts, or a flame when it is quenched. Ashton began to be very often away from me. He had not until now even left me for twenty-four hours ; and when he did so the first time it seemed strange. But I was very absorbed in a picture which I believed had more promise in it than anything I had hitherto done. I did not think so much of being alone more, as I might have, had I been without my work. And then Ashton asked Aunt Agatha to come and stay in the house. I was a little surprised at his taking the initiative, but he did so quite naturally one day when she was calling. She seemed to me to have an anxious look, but I did not attribute it to anything but that one of her boys was ill at school.

“Would you not like to go to him ? ” I asked her.

“No,” she answered ; she felt happier to be with me. She used to sit in my studio with her eyes dwelling on me. One day I had stood a long time looking at my work, when in a sudden passionate longing for sympathy I lifted my arms up and exclaimed, “Oh, how I wish the door would open and Svenski would come in.”

“Thank God he is not in London now,” ejaculated my aunt. I turned round and stared at her in amazement. The door did open almost immediately, and a servant brought me a telegram from Ashton to say he could not be back to dinner, but that he would fetch us from the theatre. He had arranged to take us that night and dine at home first.

I would not show it, but I was very disappointed and disheartened. What did this mean? Ashton used, such a little while since, to be always with me, that I could not understand or realize the change. But it troubled me. I was vexed to be left alone with Agatha when she had just said this thing about Svenski—a speech I resented without understanding it. I became capricious; a mood passed over me as a wave of the sea passes over the sand.

“I don’t care to go the theatre,” I said. “I was only going to please Ashton. Let us go and hear Patti to-night—I have a box. It will be a treat to me, for I could never get Ashton to go with me to hear Patti. He does not care for her. Fancy not caring for Patti! I shall have a real pleasure—for once.”

“But Ashton will go to the theatre to look for us,” said Aunt Agatha, perplexed.

“Well,” I said impatiently, “he can wait a few minutes. We will drive to the theatre and pick him up. He must expect to be kept waiting if he doesn’t even let me know where he is.”

Aunt Agatha looked at me with a distressed, anxious expression. No doubt I seemed to her more bitter than

I was. In reality, I was only a little piqued, and a little bewildered. I did not know that a great chasm lay before me—a precipice—what can I call it? No, I did not dream of that—yet I knew there was a rift somewhere—a slit in the garment of simulated happiness in which I had so long lived.

Agatha did not attempt to oppose my change of plan. We dined together, and then got into the carriage and went to hear Patti instead of the play.

My reader, to whom I appeal, you for whom I write you only of all the world to whom I can show my heart, who can ever understand me—you, the unknown—I want you to picture the scene as I entered my box that night. Agatha went first: a pretty, well-preserved woman of middle age, perfectly dressed and appointed, with a sweet bright face, overclouded by a look of anxious distress. Behind her I came, as like a lily as when Paul Phayre loved me. Tall, slight, with a clear white skin untouched by any faintest flush of color; dressed in white, with white diamonds on my neck, and white diamonds in my black hair. I will tell you even of my eyes, for I have often looked at them to see if what men said to me of them was true. They were like my hair—black as night, with an intensity of expression almost painful, and yet strangely attractive; and long curling black lashes standing out separately on each lid, above and below, made them startling in effect. I never entered any place where people were without every head being turned towards me. I did not know what they looked

at me for and did not care. I knew Ashton thought me the most beautiful woman that had ever stepped the earth, or that could be created ; was not that enough ? As I entered the box, Agatha sank into a chair in front of me with a rather surprising suddenness ; but I scarcely noticed it. My mind was all taken up by the sight of a most beautiful woman who sat in a box just opposite me. How glorious she was—sometimes a Rubens, the next moment a Dante Rossetti ; with red-gold hair and a vivid flush on her fruit-like face that came from mantling blood, and a mouth which was like that of Daudet's Sappho, the true Cupid's bow. I suppose if I had been a man I should have fallen in love with her on the spot. She wore opals on her neck—such a neck ! As my eyes travelled down to the stones, and the soft curves they adorned, I saw something else—my husband's face. Ashton was sitting behind her, leaning forward, so that his face was on a level with her shoulder. He seemed transfixed as by amazement or some other strong emotion, when he saw me ; his eyes were on me and remained so—for how long ?—seconds or minutes I know not. I leaned over Agatha.

“What a beautiful woman Ashton is with ! I must know her.”

Agatha started up as if my words had electrified her, took my arm, pushed me out of the box, led me downstairs and sent a commissionaire for the carriage. It is not too much to say that I, who had twenty times

Agatha's decision and will-power, submitted to all this like a child, from sheer amazement.

"Why must we go?" I said, as we stood waiting for the carriage. She made no answer. I looked at her face and was silent. I was lost in conjecture. We drove home silently, went into the house, and I led the way into my studio. I called a servant to light the great lights, and then I sat down in front of my picture.

"Now, Agatha, tell me the truth," I said.

She burst out crying. I had no pity, for I was like a stone myself, so cold at heart that my very hands were cold.

"Tell me the truth," I said.

She stopped crying and threw herself with a kind of weary, despairing movement, into a chair at a little distance from me. She told me afterwards she longed to come and kiss me, but that sitting there so white, my eyes gleaming like the diamonds I wore, I was like a panther or a savage woman, and made her afraid.

"You must know something of it," she said drearily, "you know who that brazen-faced woman is?"

"If you mean the beautiful woman with Ashton to-night, I do not know who she is," I answered.

"She is Mrs. Herries," said Agatha in a dogged tone.

I started at the name. My wedding-day came back to me; I remembered the gossip I had overheard, and Ashton's face when I had asked him who the "Herries woman" was. A flash of intelligence came to me and illuminated everything. Ashton had educated me to

some purpose. I spoke out my thoughts, or my convictions, as they came to me.

“What !” I said, “his old mistress? She came to the church to see us married. And he has gone back to her? I am too white for him. I do not wonder.”

Agatha sat and looked at me, but said nothing. I don’t know whether she thought I was going to faint. At that moment the door opened and Ashton came in. He looked at me hesitatingly and then came close to me.

“Forgive me,” he said in a low voice.

I knitted my brows and tried to think and understand what he meant.

“I have nothing to forgive,” I said. “You are tired of me. Of course if you love color you must be tired of me. Good-bye, Ashton.”

I held out my hand, took his and shook it, and let it drop. All the time it appeared to me as if I was dying, my heart had such a deathlike pang in it. He looked at me, utterly puzzled, and remained standing.

“Go now,” I said, “I cannot bear this any longer. Go back to her. Early to-morrow I will leave this house and go to my own ; and you will never be troubled by the sight of me again.”

Agatha sprang from her chair with an exclamation ; Ashton came a step nearer and put his hand on me. This roused me—I started up and shook his hand off.

“No, no, never again,” I said. “I have done with you !”

The man changed under my very eyes ; a new man

whom I had never seen, came into my life. His nostrils distended and his breath came quick.

“What!” he said, “you, *you* talk to me like this! What were you when I married you, white enchantress that you are! For I love you still and I believe no man can ever quite escape from you who has once loved you. But I married you, like a very Don Quixote; I will not be reproached and scorned by you too. What about Paul Phayre? and what about Svenski? Come, be reasonable. You are a woman of the world, and I am a man of the world; neither of us believes in the marriage law—have I not heard you call it wicked a hundred times? Well, be it so. I have said no word of reproach to you. Be careful what you say to me.”

I stood like a statue and looked him in the face. I watched him as he spoke, and as I looked and looked I knew, knew once for all that this man was a stranger to me. I had lived in his love—or his passion—for me; I had never known him. What a revelation! I stood and said nothing. I believe he said more; I do not know; I heard nothing. I believe Aunt Agatha said a great deal—I heard nothing—that she flung her arms round me—I felt nothing. I only stood and looked at Ashton, and as I did so lived over again all my hours of love with him. And it was this man I had been with! not the kind, generous, gentle creature who was the man I had fancied myself with, but this man, lolling there in an armchair, a sneer on his mouth, a cigar in his fingers which he forgot to light. *This* man, with the cruel, sensual face, who had never known me, me

myself, once in all this time! I stood there, with thoughts too bitter for expression passing like wild-fire through my brain. I don't know how late it grew, or how long it was before my mother suddenly entered the room, pale and trembling. I learned afterwards that Agatha had sent for her and insisted on her presence. She came up to me, but did not dare touch me. She knew me better than the others. For the first time I took my eyes off Ashton and looked at her; yes, this was my mother, poor weak soul, who had let me marry this profligate. For I cannot tell how, in this long contemplation of him I had penetrated Ashton's character and knew him for what he was. She said things to me—I do not know what—but at last I found words and spoke to her.

“It seems,” I said addressing her, “that my husband believed when he married me that I had been Paul Phayre's mistress?”

My mother wrung her hands, and turned to Ashton; he was watching her with a malicious smile and she turned away again.

“Everyone believed it,” she said; “he never ought to have left you that money.”

“Everyone believed it?” I repeated, “And my husband has also used M. Svenski's name in a way I do not understand.”

“Oh, Lily, Lily,” cried out my mother, “do not take it like this! You are helpless, indeed! The world is so cruel, no one will judge you rightly because of that old scandal.”

“Be it so,” I said very quietly—for the great Atlantic rollers of rage and indignation had not yet reached the shore of my consciousness. “Be it so. I am indifferent to the world. My husband has insulted me, but I suppose he does not know nor ever has known me. I will not wait till to-morrow. I will leave his house to-night, and go to my own.”

“To Paul Phayre’s,” said Ashton with a sneer. For a second my heart jumped with anger ; but I could still control it. I seemed to wake again into life ; I moved from where I had so long been standing, and went towards the door.

Then followed a scene which I cannot properly describe, because I did not hear half of what was said. I know my mother clung about my knees at last, kneeling on the floor herself, and imploring me not to commit this dreadful indiscretion—to leave my husband ; to create a scandal ! to be ostracized as I should be.

“For everyone will believe you are in fault,” she cried through her tears. “People always think it is the woman.”

I raised my head (I had been looking down at her) and looked at my husband. He had been, I suppose, without my noticing it, to the dining-room and fetched some spirit decanters and glasses. At all events he had these on a table and I suppose he had been drinking for some time. Ashton was a man who drank a great deal but I had never seen him the worse for it. What he had taken during this scene I cannot tell ; but when I looked at him there was an expression on his face which sud-

denly filled me with horror. I daresay Mrs. Herries and many other women had seen him look like this ; but I never had till now. I raised my arm and pointed to him.

“Be one of that man’s mistresses ?” I cried out. “No, not however much the sanction of the church may be upon it.” And I turned and walked out of the room.

It was dawn ; the night had passed. I went to my room and began to undress and to pack. I went on quite steadily and methodically, as if I had been used to the work all my life. When my maid came in with my tea at seven she found me sitting in a travelling dress.

“I am going down to the Court this morning,” I said, “and I wish to catch the eight o’clock train. All my things are ready ; get your own ready, and send Simpson at once to the studio to pack everything there. Tell him I am going to take the big picture with me.”

Simpson was my studio factotum. He was accustomed to vagaries and caprices on my part, more so than my maid was. All was ready in time, and without interference from any living soul we three went to the station and caught the train. I believe poor Agatha had gone home with my mother, frightened to stay ; as for Ashton I imagine he was sleeping off the various scenes he had been through, and the brandy he had taken to steady himself. For Mrs. Herries had been as deeply hurt as I was, and I afterwards heard she thought he had planned the whole thing to annoy her. He had fled from her indignation to the silent anger of such a woman as myself.

CHAPTER VII.

SUCH a woman as myself! What sort of woman was that? A Quixotic, foolish, romantic, high-strung creature, who could not quietly accept the fact that the man she had given her life to was made of clay like the rest, but must needs fly in the face of the world because of her discovery of such a simple thing. No justifiable heroine, but an unreasonable woman, hungry for an ideal that can never be realized. So I see now, but I did not then. The Atlantic rollers came: great fierce waves of rage, despair, grief, indignation, which swept over me and filled my ears with their sound so that I heard nothing else. I believe Agatha and my mother both came to me: but I did not see them. I remained locked in my studio—Paul's studio. Fortunately, it was very large and I could rave to and fro like a caged panther. Why had not Paul lived to tell the truth about me to the world, I asked the walls a thousand times. I was still deluded, still a fond, fond foolish creature, even in the midst of my disillusionment. For I have lived to know it is more than possible that if he had told the truth he would not have been believed, but would have been regarded as perjuring himself as a gentleman should; worse still, that perhaps he would have been made to believe other slanders about me

and would have refused to tell the truth, or have left me as completely alone as I now was. For in the light of later experiences I perceive there is nothing reliable ; no man, no circumstance, no truth. All is liable to change, all is liable to decay. The very truth itself may fade from a man's mind and he may see another thing in its place. There are no living facts in life ; there is nothing but the circumstance of our own individual mental attitude at the moment. I used to fancy truth and love were living facts. Poor fool !

I am talking straightforwardly now, as I have never been able to talk before—chiefly, I think, because other people had their own ideas and interrupted mine with them. My mother's idea was to keep up appearances ; my aunt Agatha's to be happy, superficially and at any cost, and make others happy in the same way. These subjects never interested me. I have always wanted to know the actual meaning of things. Persons like my mother and aunt are always aiming at an ideal which is unrealizable. So was I, it is true ; but they never surrendered their ideals, while I have surrendered mine. All I try to discover now is what things mean. This writing of mine will remain in the archives of fiction, where so much reality is buried, and be regarded as nonsense by indifferent persons. There must surely be a science of life formed in course of time, and thinkers will exist who will deal with the facts of human living. Is there any one in this world who can explain to me the dream which so precipitated my union with Ashton ? Why did I see my own figure, instead of seeing him ?

Had my spirit been to him and invoked his dream and invited my fate? I cannot tell. Why were we attracted together, only to be flung so violently apart? Who can tell? These things happen every day and help to make up the sum of human misery—and joy, perhaps—it is hard to distinguish, looking back. I am no metaphysician, no student of philosophy, save in so far as philosophy could bring me comfort, but it is very plain to me that one's own brain and its working is the actual limit of the horizon. There can be nothing beyond that, nothing extraneous. And yet the most confirmed materialist is compelled to pause sometimes and say "how can the working of the brain account for this?" Visions and dreams cannot always be explained away; that is all I can say as I sit here looking into the embers. But I have lived now; I should have spoken very differently then before I had even begun to live. I believed in the mysteries of life then; the beyond, the invisible, the ideal. Ah, me, my heart! Is it men that break one's heart, or the miserable conviction they force upon one that there is no ideal which can be justified by any fact? I think the latter. To me now, looking back, those I have loved are shadows, and their faces blend together, but the bitter lessons they have taught me stand out alone, clear, distinct—destructive. Yes, destructive of faith, virtue, hope. Those words had once a full and vivid meaning for me, each of them; but now they are empty sounds, brazen sounds, mere jangling of dull bells. When I shut myself up in Paul's studio, and retreated into the

solitude of my own feelings I fancied such a tempest of emotion as tore me then must be a thing in a lifetime, a great event, which would dwarf everything else. I imagined that my whole life was swallowed up and wrecked in this rage and grief from which I so bitterly suffered. It was indeed a fearful ordeal at the time, and though I put it back into its proper place now among the events of my life, I shudder at the recollection of it—shudder, yes, as I sit here. And, strange though it may seem, it was not the thought of Ashton's treachery, nor is it now : it was then and still is the recollection of his touch, his caresses. Since then I have lived to learn that a man can love twenty women at once, and expects a woman of the world to accept his love of the moment for what it is worth ; and she retaliates in kind. But then, child as I was, virginal in heart and soul, it was like a knife passed through my brain to realize how Ashton had come from his mistress to me and gone from me to her ; it made my flesh cold and drawn, as sudden physical pain does. And the thought produces the same effect on me now, as I sit here. Well, of course ; a slight accident when one is a child will leave a mark for life ; and one may go on to the battlefield and stand safe amid the shot afterwards. This misery of mine made a deep scar ; a scar so deep that when I think of it once more it becomes a misery,—I seem to feel again the wound that made the scar. And yet I cannot now at all clearly recollect Ashton's face. I have described him, and I could describe him again, in that way ; but the look on

his face, the glance of his eyes when they fell on me, that mysterious look of love which made me quiver with its fire, that expression which makes another person your own—that has all faded away. It was so strong, that though it must often have been given to other women besides myself, that thought would not drive it back in my memory. It is simply obliterated, for I have been devoured by other eyes since then, which seem to me now more real than his. Perhaps I am wrong, and in the moment of death I shall see his most vividly. But let me tell you, who are still young in life, who have not passed into the maturity, when, if one has lived and not only vegetated, one has knowledge, let me tell you that the first real grief of life is indeed the most keen at the moment, but it is not the most lasting. It is the blank disappointment which comes with later years that makes the days a burden, the nights a pain—the sense that there is nothing to look for, hope for, cherish. I see myself now, as I look back, a glad creature by comparison with what I became later, and with what I have seen in others ; for I was an idealist and as an idealist I fought my pain. This gave me the precious sense of superiority, the capacity for fierce indignation, and, by degrees, as the fever of rage lessened on me, the power to form intense resolutions to vow myself to a lofty fate, to look at life through a poetic halo and fancy myself a superb martyr.

That was not how the world looked on me I assure you. Fortunately for me, I was always proud and

disdainful; otherwise I must have suffered bitterly indeed from the isolation which marked my existence at the Court. For I behaved like a fool—my only excuse is that I was an idealist, and that I had never learned to look at things from a worldly point of view.

I emerged from my isolation at last to find my mother and Agatha sitting together in sad silence. I greeted them with bitter words and drove them from me. “Why had they ever let me marry that profligate, that shameless roué.” There was no measure to the bitter recklessness of my speech. Remember, as some excuse, that I was only a child. I had not learned that words are always useless. My mother and aunt said nothing; only stood there weeping. Presently my mother said “Don’t blame her, Agatha; she has always been like this.

“I don’t blame her,” said Agatha. “But I must speak now, you know, if you will not. I cannot stay in her house any longer, after what she has said to me, though I love her ever so dearly; nor I think can even you, her mother. But we must speak. Shall I?”

“Oh yes, you,” said my mother, in a sudden passion of tears. “She will not listen to me. She and I have never understood each other.”

I turned on Agatha, wheeling round quickly, with some terrible look on my face, I suppose, for she shrank a step or two from me. Then with a courage I wonder at now, she spoke.

“Don’t you know, dear Lily,” she said. “Can’t

you understand, dear child, that you will ruin your whole life unless you will listen to reason?"

"What do you mean?" I asked; and she shrank back another step; but, taking her courage in both hands, spoke out plainly. O, these poor, fond women! I have made them suffer as much as others have made me, perhaps. It is always the way in this world. We do not understand each other. I could not explain myself to them nor they to me. There was no common ground of understanding or intelligence.

"Listen a moment quietly, Lily," said Agatha. "It is folly to come here and shut yourself away from your husband. You know how people talk, and how they always blame the woman. What a woman needs is her husband's protection; if she has even done wrong that places her right with the world; but you, my dear child, you, so beautiful and reckless and innocent, you need a husband's protection more than anyone could.

There was a pause and I think they expected me to speak. But my mind had wandered away; you who have suffered enough will know how this happens at the bitterest moments. I was thinking of the *School for Scandal* and Joseph Surface's argument with Lady Teazle. Here was my poor aunt using exactly the same argument, though she would no doubt have been amazed and horror-struck had I told her so. Lady Teazle suffered from calumny because she was innocent. "It is this very conscious innocence that is of the greatest prejudice to you."

One false step would make her a part of society

instead of an isolated atom. I must have been fearfully *surexitée*, for I stood there quite still, while my mind went back to an occasion when I had seen Henry Irving play Joseph to Adelaide Neilson's Lady Teazle : I went over the scene, and thought how little I had understood that dialogue and its bitter cynicism when I had seen it, sitting as I was in happy faith at Ashton's side. The memory of him brought me abruptly to the present. Because I was so innocent !

“Well?” I said to Agatha. She went on, but more timidly.

“Don't you see, dear,” she said, “that young as you are and beautiful, not even your mother's protection would be sufficient for you, even if you let her stay here. It was not sufficient before. You need your husband's. You must let him come down here, if you wish to stay here ; let him come to and fro. He promises he will not annoy you ; that until you can forgive him of yourself he will say nothing to trouble you—only, to prevent scandal with the servants, you must pretend to be on good terms—and there is that great ball of Lady Steeple's, you must really go with him to that and then all will be right—”

She stopped, checked, I think, by something in my face. I looked slowly from her to my mother. “Is this really what you propose to me?” I said.

My mother spoke, apparently encouraged by my quiet tone.

“Here is a letter from Ashton,” she said. “It is quite humble and kind ; and you know, Lily, it was

only that unfortunate public meeting you could complain of; and that was really your own fault. If you would only read it—" and she held it out to me.

Then I seem to forget what I said. At least there were a few moments in which I suppose rage took hold of me and became such a passion that memory refused to follow it. I remember next finding myself standing with outstretched arms, and the letter on the floor, torn, as by a frenzied creature, into a thousand irregular fragments.

"If the world you talk of is the world you want me to be in," I was saying, "I would rather be in solitude forever! Liars and hypocrites! What shelter does an innocent woman need? What protection can such a man as this give, that is worthy of my acceptance? As for Ashton Harcourt I will never see him again so long as I live."

With these words I swept out of the room and, going back to the studio, double-locked the door. I went and crouched by a low French window at one side of the room, which opened on a balcony. From here I could see the lawn and the drive and the great trees that bordered it and made a stately avenue. From here I had the satisfaction presently of seeing my mother and Aunt Agatha depart in the station carriage with their maids and all their luggage. I watched the carriage until it was out of sight, wondering dimly what I had said to them to drive them from me like this? Bitter reproaches no doubt, I had heaped upon them. Well, they were gone, and I was glad. I was alone, now, with

my pain, and I was glad of it. I sat there a long while, conscious of a kind of relief, in that now no one would argue with me, or try to make me understand unintelligible things. At last I grew cramped and wanted to move, and dimly wondered what there was to move for. Suddenly, like a flash of electricity, came through my brain the recollection of my picture. I dragged myself up from the ground and stood bewildered. I remembered that I was not only a neglected wife, a woman betrayed, a creature hurt and aggrieved by the world, but an artist. Yes! only a little while ago I had been inspired—I stood with my hands to my head looking stupidly round the room, for my overtaxed mind had again lost the thought of my picture. Then I caught sight of the carefully packed canvas standing against the wall, and once more the electric thrill struck across my misery. I rang for my studio-servant; and then threw myself down in a large easy-chair to watch the picture being unpacked. It was freed from its wrappings at last and then lifted on to the great easel and wheeled round in front of me. What a mysterious thing the artist's frenzy is! The brain has its work cut out to keep up with the impetus of the fever, if indeed it is brain and brain only, all that we know and are and seem—if matter is the whole.

“’Tis to create, and, in creating, live,
A being more intense that we endow
With form, our fancy gaining as we give
The thing we image, even as I do now.
What am I? Nothing. But not so art thou,
Soul of my thought.”

My heart had never echoed a Byronic sentiment before ; but now these lines stood out in my mind and there came the delight of recognizing what had seemed a sentiment to be a truth. It is like recognizing a fellow spirit, only that it has none of the inevitable excitement and disappointment which must follow such a recognition. My mind was cleared and cooled for the moment, as though ice had been laid on my forehead. Over and over again I repeated to myself :—

“What am I? Nothing. But not so art thou.”

The poignancy of my pain was dulled by this new thought ; my own personality and its wrongs retreated from the front of the stage of my thoughts. Between that wounded creature and its wounds rose the bright dream of my art-work, and then in myself came the longing for accomplishment and consummation. I was so physically worn out with grief that I could not rise from my chair or lift my hand ; I sat as long as daylight lasted, looking at the suggestions which were all the canvas contained, and seeing the completed picture—no, not that, for an artist never sees that ; he sees his ideal and so is never satisfied with his work.

That is just it—that is why a real artist is inevitably sad. An ideal cannot be realized. Picture then to yourself a young woman such as I was, with an ideal not only in art but in life and thought. Ah ! you, my friends, that are “idealists” drag out this shrine from your soul and desecrate it, if you can find how to. It is not fit for this world you have to live in, and it unfits

you for it. Be warned by me and my shattered life. I had been too much of an idealist to be deceived by religions and priests ; I had discovered the charlatan of necessity hidden under every monkish and priestly dress, and detected the dogma that darkens every religion and semblance of a religion ; but I was even more deeply deceived in men and woman, because I had never been able to have any faith in the unknown. Virtue and hope remained. Ah, brazen idols, false images !

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM that long fit of thought and abstraction, I fell into a deep sleep—the first that had come to me since I had seen Ashton with Mrs. Herries at the theatre. When I awoke from that sleep it seemed as though I had awakened from a phase of feeling at the same time ; a phase which could never be repeated or enter into my life again. But I was mistaken as one so often is ; the phase was roused again in me later on, and all the suffering had to be experienced over again. But for the moment a cord was loosed, a knot untied, something in myself was eased. Indeed I never really re-lived that phase, for its centre never existed for me again. One day of love was over ; that of Ashton Harcourt ; I lay still on my bed, when my maid had succeeded in taking me to it and undressed me, late in the night. I lay there and thought, almost coldly, of what I had been through. That man had made me suffer ! My feeling was contempt for Ashton, and for myself because I had cared for him and let him make me suffer. I know this was unjust, with the injustice that is a vital part of the virginal instinct. I had been true to Ashton, and never dreamed of being anything else, even if I had grown to hate him actively. I thought—like a fool, or, in other words, like an

idealist—that he ought to have been true to me. Looking back in the humor I now was I began to fancy I had always hated him—how often had I shrunk from his kiss, how often had I longed to free myself from his grasp? Once more I remembered a thought of Lord Byron's, which it seemed to me now I for the first time understood : that there must necessarily be the element of hatred as well as of love in the passion which exists between a man and a woman. I lay wearily, so wearily, there, wondering whether it could really be that this was what people called love—this the whole thing ! a fever of passion, faithlessness, anger, and then all at an end. Was there indeed nothing else to be found in the world ? No other love nearer my ideal ? Then, indeed, it would be better to keep to my studio ; to be an artist and nothing but an artist, and forget the existence of the world of love. Surely it was satiated in me—surely I could forget and desire nothing more and think of my work alone. And fixing the thought of my picture in my mind I grew easier and fell asleep again. It was morning when I awoke and saw the sun shining in at my window. How I had hated the sun in the last terrible phase of my life—how I had looked on it, with horror, because it seemed so joyless—now a faint gleam of pleasure came to me again as I looked at it, and I lay a long while with my eyes fixed on the friendly sun-ray. In truth my brain was beginning to recover its balance, to return to its natural happy state. Its natural happy state ! If happiness is natural why is life made up of such wrenchings away of happiness, such

hopeless, desperate clings to it? But what is the use of asking foolish questions? I can only say it is an old habit of mine which I am trying to cure myself of, and that I will ask as few as I can. For a long time past I have been merely looking at things, and trying to arrange them and see them as they really are. Perhaps I have got nearer the truth than most women; at all events I am readier to say what I believe to be true than I have found other women to be. As I lay there, looking at the sun-ray, I seemed to pause between two lives: the past I saw was indeed the past; it was over. Yet I had no power to free myself from Ashton Harcourt. I was his wife. That seemed to me to shut down the door of my life, so far as the world went. I, the proud beauty, the rare creature who had been always loved, was Mrs Ashton Harcourt, the deserted, neglected wife. I saw this, but it did not anger me as it had angered me yesterday. I only felt now that I was put in a place which did not fit me. I was not myself, the artist, free, disassociated from any one. I was Mrs. Ashton Harcourt. Oh, marriage, 'how cruel that thing is!'

“ Marriage and death and division
Make barren our lives.”

Yes, this is true of too many of us. Bright years are wasted in a loveless marriage; and when we have fled from it the law holds us still. Out-flee that and where shall a woman go? There is no short step for her, no half-measures; she can find no comfort or solace by the way, but must fly to “the chapels, unknown of the

sun," where all is forgotten, where oblivion reigns, where the face of the world is changed "in a twilight where virtues are vices," where there is no memory and no dread. I have been there since ; but then I knew not such a twilight was, and struggled alone with my wound and my bare heart, harassed and troubled by my faith. I had only virtue and hope left ; but they are a great deal ; enough to make a buddha, enough to destroy and make barren the life of a plain human being, unlit by either fire, divine or devilish.

Hope, still unquenched in my young nature, roused me at last, and I got up from my bed and went into my studio. Yes, there was my canvas ; and the image that should be on it burned in my brain. Surely here I could forget I was Mrs. Ashton Harcourt ? Yes—I tried the note in my mind and found that it failed to answer. Hope had come to my rescue for the moment, and I was the artist. I began to work, and steadily and surely the fever seized me, the fever of creation, of accomplishment. Oh, what becomes of women who have nothing but love to live for ? None can blame them whatever folly may rule their course. And men too—do they not suffer from the same great sadness ? Ah, yes ! though I did not know that then, I know it now. For myself I had one great salvation—an absorbing thought—a fierce inspiration, which had nothing to do with love. And yet in the end I am not saved. But then, what is salvation ?—ah, no, that is asking a foolish question again.

I worked on steadily, the fire burning as if it had

never been extinguished, as if no sudden earthquake had shaken the world beneath my feet and put me out of my place and left me desolate. For the moment I could keep the earthquake and its dreadful consequences out of my mind. When I say for the moment, I mean while I was painting that picture. For I worked at unnatural speed ; my brain and heart were on fire, and I leaped at my canvas like a wild thing. I could bear no one to enter the room. I locked the door on my servants. I must be alone with the thing I loved for the time, alone and undisturbed. My very self entered that work : it was as though I loved it and gave myself to it. I seemed to reach beyond the limit of human thought, sometimes, beyond the reach of human power. I know I did not ; I know that it was only my brain in an unusual state of excitement that produced all these abnormal results. But what does it matter, after all, what one calls inspiration ? It exists, for all artists, all thinkers. It is of no importance what we call it. The same mysterious elevation of the soul exists also in love—that pale love whose wet eyes are darkened at last with the tresses of Dolores. That is to me now the awful thing in life ; that all is hushed, all is darkened that aspires ; greatness is no better than obscurity, work no more real than idleness, good indistinguishable from evil ; and love, the glorifying power, weeps, and succumbs. It is of love that I am writing. It is the history of my heart that I am telling ; therefore, I say nothing of my work. I will only speak of it as it affected my life. I was shut in

Paul's studio for three months alone with that canvas ; and I put every pang of my heart, every thrill of my suffering being upon it. That was a picture to make the angels weep ; if there be any angels. White-winged creatures such as idealism has taught us to fancy hover round us, tender and pure, if any of these were near me as I worked they must have made great sobbings in the soundless space in which they dwell. But if they were there I knew not of them—I was alone with my thought and my pain.

There came a day when my pain seemed dead, and I was numb ; when my thought was all worked out ; when the brain and the brush had done its utmost. I was no longer an artist. I was only tired, sick of life, of everything. I had forgotten the look of the sunshine the smell of the air ; and there was none to draw me towards them again. I had my picture turned away and lay on a couch, with closed eyes.

Many persons had been to see me ; Ashton had come several times. But I was in the fury of creation, and would see no one and hear nothing. Now a faint wonder as to the other persons who had figured in the drama of my life entered my mind. When my maid next entered the room I asked her when last there had been any visitors.

“There is a gentleman here now,” she said, rather doubtfully. “He is someone you have seen about your pictures before. I told him you had been working and had seen no one ; but that I thought you had finished. He asked me to tell you he was here, and said he would

wait any time. I hope I have not done wrong, madame. Here is his card."

The name roused me. It was that of a great picture-dealer.

"Ask him to come up here," I said, and rose from my couch. When Mr. Harburton entered the room he started visibly ; and for the first time it occurred to me that my appearance must be very much altered.

He murmured a few common places, and then asked if I had not been painting a picture.

"Yes," I said "It is there."

"May I turn it round?" he asked.

"Certainly," I answered. He turned the big easel to the light and stood before it in silence. After a long time he came and sat down in a chair near me.

"This will establish you as a great artist immediately," he said in a quiet voice, "and will stand for posterity, whatever else you do. I tell you this, because I know it is true, and I doubt if you are in a condition to judge the merit of your work. Now will you trust me with it for the moment? I am sure you do not care to go into business arrangements at present ; but you know me well enough to let me act for you. I should like to take that back to town with me, and put it alone in one of my galleries in Bond Street. It ought to be shown for the rest of this winter season, and all through the next summer season. After that it may have to travel ; but I think not."

"Take it with you !" I said, my mind retaining only one thing out of all he said. "But it is not dry yet."

“Oh, I will pack it safely!” he exclaimed. “Trust me, no one shall touch it but myself. Have I your permission?”

“Oh, yes,” I answered apathetically. He set to work at once, only letting my servant hand him what he wanted. He packed the picture himself, and soon he was gone and the picture too. I hardly realized what had taken place. I did not miss the picture, for I had ceased to have any desire to look at it. I had done it. The creation was gone, had passed out of my life.

After sitting still a long while in that strange, vacant mental state which only those who have suffered mental anguish know of, I suddenly remembered Mr. Harburton's start when he first saw me; I got up and walked slowly into another room where there was a beautiful Psyche mirror.

Was this indeed myself? Where was the grand creature, the proud beauty that I had been used to see reflected in the mirror? This woman I saw was like a soul but now escaped from hell, newly loosed on the healthy earth, and with the lambent fires of torture still burning in her eyes. With a gesture of horror I turned away from the glass and went back to my couch.

I sank now into a condition like that of a sick child. I was so exhausted that I knew nothing and thought of nothing. I lay clasping a great soft silk cushion beneath me, as you will see a tired child do; I held it for the sake of its faint comfort, and often fell asleep or into long fits of unconsciousness—I hardly know which—perhaps sometimes the one and sometimes the other.

One day I opened my eyes and saw my mother standing by me ; my lids drooped, and when I lifted them again she was gone. I suppose she was afraid of my bitterness and my harsh words. I am sure I do not wonder. Indignation is so useless, and it only makes life harder. I can see that now, but I could not then. The Sermon on the Mount has always seemed to me full of the most admirable worldly wisdom : a business man would do well if he could conduct himself always according to its precepts. And its climax is that cynical piece of advice, " Resist not evil." I see it now, only too plainly. My anger against evil was only a waste of myself, it did but exhaust me ; and what use was it? For our Father which art in Heaven, maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

" Thou shalt live, until evil be slain
And good shall die first—"

So my thoughts wander now, from the words of a great preacher to those of a latter-day poet. Good and evil ! How have I struggled with these ideas and endeavored to restrain them ! But experience of the world destroys them, and the typically pure preacher grants that the personal God whom he established for his followers certainly sends rain and sun alike for the evil and the good ; while our last poetic thinker strikes a deeper, sadder note when he says, " Good shall die first." But both recognize the same fact, that good and evil are but forces in the world, not indications of the divine or the devil in man ; blind forces, like the north wind and the

south wind, like the ebb and flow of the sea. The force of the wind or the wave passes over us, and leaves its mark. Can we make the north wind come from the south? "Resist not evil." What a maxim! Had I learned it early I would not have become the torn and miserable creature that I did. But I had not begun to read intelligently then.

I fancy I was very ill. I have no recollection further than of hazy, misty days, and burning, feverish nights, and strange thoughts that haunted me and seemed like living beings. But I must have been very ill, for I was told at a later day that my mother was dead; and they would not have kept her illness or death from me if I had not been very ill myself.

A moment came at last when I was not parched, when I saw the room I lay in plainly, and once more understood who I was. In fact I had recovered, I was well again. Only I was so weak I could not long keep my eyes open.

A month later and I was in the garden, made pleasant by the first signs of spring. I had learned that my mother was dead; Agatha had come to tell me, and had left again in a day, for one of her boys was ill, and she could not leave him. Otherwise, I believe she would have stayed with me whatever I might have said or done; for she was evidently frightened by my appearance and the apathy with which I heard the story of my mother's death. I was very selfish; people who believe themselves to be good generally are; and my chief thought was a kind of pity for myself, and then a kind

of gladness, in that I was now so absolutely alone in the world. I was glad Agatha had to go, and that she had ties, else she might have clung to me; and I wanted no affection, I wanted to be alone with my despair, and nurse my wrongs, and think of evil as a thing apart from myself which I, the perfected, could resist. Oh, yes, that is what the good do, who read their Bibles! Who *can* resist evil? The ascetic, the aspirant to virtue falls before it, because he lets it enter his nobler nature and crush that. Who shall escape the north wind? Not the one who stands on the mountain tops.

I was full of virtue, and of anger. I had exhausted hope in my picture. That reminds me to record here that Aunt Agatha had told me some other things which would have surprised me had I been in any less apathetic condition. How my picture had been the talk of Europe; and not only was the gallery always crowded with ordinary picture-seers, but great artists had travelled specially to London to see it; that the nation wished to buy it, and were waiting my answer. "Well," I thought as I listened wearily, "I have worked and that is enough; I need not rouse myself to work any more." This brought me a profound sense of consolation; for now all I needed was to be still. Agatha left me a number of newspapers, to show that she had only spoken the truth; and this spring morning that I spoke of just now I had asked for them, and sitting idly in the garden turned them over; yes, it was all true. But glancing indifferently over the pages my eyes fell on a paragraph in a society journal which seemed suddenly to blot out the sunshine.

“The notorious Mrs. Ashton Harcourt, who left her husband under such extraordinary circumstances lately, has proved herself a genius of the first water. It is too much to expect an artist as great as this to obey the conventionalities of life; and though there has been more than one scandal about this lady, commencing with a most romantic one in her early youth, everything must be forgiven and forgotten in the presence of such power. Mrs. Grundy, however, is likely to have a word or two to say on the subject in the future; and she is not an appreciator of the arts.”

I dropped all the newspapers on the gravel-path beside me and tried to think. Of course this was only what I had to expect, and what my mother and Agatha had tried to shield me from. I had behaved like an idealist, like a quixotic fool, and I must pay the penalty for tilting at windmills. But I could not understand this then; I could not think like this then. I was in just the opposite condition. I sat blindly trying to grasp the fact that *I*—who was innocent—was “the notorious Mrs. Ashton Harcourt.” The effort passed, for I was too weak to sustain it; and I leaned back in my chair. The vacant reverie fell on me, which is in reality the salvation of a tortured brain. I turned my head from side to side looking at the garden and the trees and sky, more in wonder than with any other feeling. Suddenly I noticed a man approaching me along the gravel walk. There was something familiar about him, but at first it had no meaning for me. Then all at once I recognized Svenski.

CHAPTER IX.

SVENSKI came towards me slowly, his tall figure leaning a little towards me as if something drew him. When within a few steps of me he stopped and looked into my face. His eyes narrowed as he looked. I heard him murmur a word and only just caught it—*“pauvre.”*

“I need no pity,” I cried out. “Have you come here to pity me?”

His eyes opened and the pupils dilated as if before a light.

“My God, no!” he exclaimed “the great woman is here as the great artist is in your picture. You are not dead! Thank the dear God for that.”

“Dead?” I repeated, bewildered. He laughed—a light laugh that seemed to hurt me.

“Oh, I knew your body was alive,” he answered, or I should not have come here. But yourself—the Lily—the strong thing, the upstanding flower—it is not crushed. When I first saw you, before your eyes gleamed like that, I feared it was. Let me speak.”

“Speak on,” I replied, my eyes still on his, trying to fathom his meaning.

“I have come to England to see your picture; only for that. When I saw it, and saw what they said of it

was true, I knew I must come to you. Do not push me back, do not repel me; remember I have no one else in the world to look to but you."

"I cannot understand you," I said, rising to my feet. There was something in his atmosphere, his magnetism—well, what shall I say—in his brain, that weighed on me.

"Come inside," I said, after a second's pause. I recognized that I had something strange and unfamiliar to cope with, and I feared I might faint, I was still so weak. I suddenly felt I had better be within reach of other help than his.

I walked a few steps down the path and went in at the window of my little morning-room. It was shaded and pleasant; my easy-chair was in its accustomed corner whence I could reach the bell without moving. I sat down here, and he brought a chair close to me.

"I have heard," he said, "of all your strange story. I have heard strange things about you too; but they do not concern me. I know *you*; and no ale-house tales or drawing-room scandals affect me. Ah, my dear one, why did you clip your wings by marrying that man? I never could understand it. Let him go, let him spend his time in his own society, where there is no meaning, nor any sense spoken. Forget him."

"He is forgotten," I answered very quietly, out of the fancied strength of my own soul.

"Ah, then, come to me, come to me! Think how strong we shall be, we two together! None can touch us, none can come near us! Our thoughts, our dreams,

our hopes—one ! How often have I looked into your eyes and thought of what might have been !—but now there is time. Then I believed all was ended—that there was no hope, that it would all come too late. But we have years of life and of work left—my proud Lily, the purest and proudest woman I ever saw, let me gather you. I am more worthy to than any other man, if only by right of my work, for I stand nearest to you—and so I am not ashamed to ask it. What a boon to ask—but, no, I am not ashamed. I am small, I am little by your side ; but I must ask and you must give. I want you, you, the proud Lily ; I must have you !”

I sat still, and made no answer. I was cold, spell-bound, a woman chained by an ideal. I did not call his words an insult in my own mind, because I recognized that they were real ; that the whole man was speaking to me, without calculation, and merely out of his sense that I was free. But the force of his emotion broke upon me as the waves of the sea break upon a rock. I was marble. He put his hand on mine as it lay on the arm of the chair ; and drew it away again of himself, startled by the insensibility he encountered.

“My God !” he exclaimed, “have I hurt you or wounded you, that you treat me like this ? Forgive me, forgive me. I would never have come near you to break upon your solitude had I not seen, or fancied I saw, long ago, a light in your eyes that answered to mine. May Heaven have pity on me if it was only fancy ! It will break my heart. But it cannot be so. Ah, remember, my Lily, how often I have touched

your hand and looked into your fathomless eyes, and gone silently away. It was bitter, it was hard, but I did it; it was necessary. The laws of social life would have made it an insult for me to speak to you then; but not now. Now you will let me speak." He knelt down by my side as he said this, and put his arms round me. "Tell me," he said, in an intense whisper that sounded louder to me than any cry, "tell me I am not utterly wrong! Don't kill me by this silence! Why do you sit there, like a statue. Are you insensible? Is it so?"

He drew back a little to look into my face, and in doing so dropped one hand upon my arm. He caught and clutched it; and the fire from his touch suddenly roused me.

"What is it you want of me?" I asked, enabled at last to speak. For I really believe I was ice and he was flame; and I might have lapsed into a cold unconsciousness but for the heat of his touch. Now I was aroused. I could feel the warmth of his whole self, like a cloud or a vapor that came from him to me and enveloped me—oh, how near he was! How faint I was! I pushed him a little away from me—as far as I could, but he was very strong and not in the humor to be lightly moved from the position we had taken up, physically and emotionally. Ah, what a cruel rock a man can be when he loves.

"What do I want of you?" he said in his fierce whisper that seemed to pierce my brain. "What should I want of you but yourself. I doubt if you can love

me—not now, at all events, when you are so broken—I will not think of that. But let me have you—have you to comfort, to help, to be my own utterly, body and soul—let me heal you and bring back life again to those pale lips and weary eyes. Come away with me—leave this horrible country—come away with me to Italy, to Greece, to some old land where the dead at least knew how to live, and have made the soil warm with the passion of past ages. Come!—I will give my life to you and wrap you round so that no hurt can ever come near you—”

His voice died away and he remained, his eyes gleaming as they looked into mine. I could no longer endure his close presence, for at last I was beginning to understand him. I rose and stood clinging to the mantel-shelf, while he remained at my feet, just holding a fold of my dress lightly in his hand.

“Your wife—your children—” I said.

“Ah, let them go!” he exclaimed, “they have all they need. In God’s name I pray you do not think of these things, things of every day. We live but once, and that for but a short while; let us snatch the drops of manna that come to us; only once does love come to any man or woman. My Lily, it has come to us—can you refuse me?”

He stood up suddenly, and towered over me, though I am a tall woman. But oh, how strong he was, and how slight I. And yet my untaught will broke forth and conquered, my strong Quixotism asserted its right to wreck my happiness.

“Never !” I cried out. “Never will I spoil the life of another woman, as a woman has spoiled mine ! That is the one infamy, because it is cruel. Go back to her to whom you owe allegiance—go back—go back !”

I turned and faced him full as I said this. He looked me in the eyes steadily and turned very pale. It seemed to me quite a long time that we stood like this. His eyes held mine, narrowed, opened, narrowed again, seemed to strive to fathom mine, or else to learn something from them, with an intensity of observation such as a physician uses when he has a patient in some crisis before him. I stood still under this gaze, returning it in full. At last he looked away.

“You mean it ;” he said ; not as a question, but in the hopeless tone of one asserting a hated fact. “You are mad,” he added, after a moment, “but you mean it.” He quickly turned from me, snatched up his hat, went out at the open window and was gone.

I sank back into my chair and sat there, almost unconscious. Indeed I *was* unconscious, except for a keen, vivid thought in my brain. It took different shapes and forms, as thus—“I had done right—I had conquered—I had saved myself—I was virtuous—it was good that I had conquered—Svenski would know there was one good woman in the world—one who could resist temptation—yes, I was good—I was virtuous—I was not to be swayed by mere passion.”

Do you think it is pleasant for me to record this ? But I can bear to do it now, for illusion is gone—“the

old hours retire"—and I promised at the outset that I would try and explain every thought and feeling, therefore I must put this down; and I demand of other good and virtuous people, who are also honest, whether they, too, are not proud and vain and selfish in their innermost souls. Because I had a standard to live up to, because I was caked with self-respect from head to foot, I thought nothing of Svenski except as a tempter. I thought nothing of his suffering, his ineradicable disappointment, the life-long soreness which such events leave on a passionate nature like his. I have nothing to offer in self-defence, nothing to say in extenuation. I look back now upon the beautiful white-faced woman who sat in that chair, proud in the consciousness of her own uprightness, with a measureless contempt. What was it I was so proud of? How came it that my heart was hard, and no tender spot in it bled for the man who had come so far to offer me his life, himself?

Of late years I have learned to look on things from different sides, to view situations from the points of view which the several persons concerned in them might hold. And I tell you, my reader, I am grown afraid of good people. They are so self-centred, so egotistical. I am grown afraid of people who make professions. I made professions that night in my heart. I had praise and pity for myself and none for Svenski. I reproached him bitterly because he gave me not friendship but love. I was very ignorant. I have no other excuse to offer.

CHAPTER X.

I SLEPT peacefully that night, and awoke proud and quiet in the morning. But my egotistical peace was soon broken in upon by another visitor, even more unexpected, if that were possible, than Svenski himself. As I stepped out of my morning-room window I came face to face with Ashton Harcourt. He looked to me like a stranger; and yet his presence had the power to freeze the blood in my veins. I had never dreamed of seeing him alive again. I had fancied I might look on his corpse, or he on mine; but never that I should look on his face like this, in the sunshine, in the fresh air, just as though I were still his wife. For I had so wrung myself from the past that I had forgotten I was still his wife.

“You have refused to see me so often,” he said, “that I am obliged to wait at your door for the chance of seeing you. Yet I am your husband, Lily, and I want to do all that is right.”

I looked at him, and at the sound of that too-familiar voice, dropped to the softest note, the blood in me seemed all to go to my heart. I suppose he thought I was going to faint, for he hastily brought a garden chair that stood close by, and put his hand on my arm to induce me to sit down in it. At his touch I screamed. I

do not think I have ever screamed before or since. I have never screamed, certainly, when other women do ; the events which frighten them interest me, and I look on with profound attention, right through the most exciting point. But this was like an ice-cold hand laid on my heart. It was the actual shock of a physical horror or pain. Ashton started back from me. "What is the matter?" he exclaimed. "Are you hysterical?"

I sank into the chair and tried to think. I forgot that he expected an answer. I was trying to understand what I had felt. After watching me a moment he brought another chair and sat down close beside me. I raised my eyes and looked steadily at him—suddenly sense and understanding came to me. His touch had been like the touch of a corpse, for his passion for me was dead. This man loved me no longer. I sat in pulseless amazement. The sun surely must stand still, nature must express for me my voiceless pain. Yes, this is how it affected me. I felt my tragedy to be unique, one alone, a thing of itself. I had not even guessed then that change is the one certain thing we know of in this life of ours—none can discover its meaning—whether it is part of a real law of evolution, or a mere blind fact. But it is certain. When we resist it we quarrel with an irresistible force ; and this crushes and kills us with the mercilessness of nature. I, proud, foolish creature, was resisting it now, and I brought upon myself deserved suffering. Thoroughly deserved it, for I was resenting what I had no right to resent. My regard for Ashton had died at one blow the night I

left him, and yet I resented bitterly the complete death of his passion for me. I had been accustomed to exercise power over him ; I had none now to exercise. I knew this and recognized it, and was made blindly angry by it. And I was at that time what people habitually call a good woman ! and I believed myself to be a good woman.

“ You must take care of your health,” he said. “ I do not want you to stay in this gloomy, quiet place. Will you not travel ? Take some friend with you and go abroad. It would be so much better for you.”

I looked steadily at him, and only succeeded, by giving him great attention, in mastering the meaning of his words. Then I replied, “ I am free to do as I like, I suppose.”

“ Not quite,” said Ashton, “ you are my wife, you know ; you bear my name ; and besides you are a genius, marked and noticed by every one, and I am very proud of you. I will do all that can be done to save you annoyance, and to prevent your being talked about. I understand from Lady McCleod that it is useless to try and persuade you to live with me again at present. But all may come well in time. Meanwhile, we must hide from the world the condition of things between us. You cannot live alone here, without any companion or friend, and let Svenski come to see you. Go abroad for your health ; Lady McCleod will go with you ; and I will go to Africa and shoot tigers.”

I have never been frivolous, if I am sometimes called cynical ; yet I made a speech now which seemed to

me, the moment I had uttered it, hideous, both in its cynicism and its frivolity.

“Does Mrs. Herries like the idea of Africa?” I said.
“It is a pity to risk her beautiful complexion.”

I believe that at the most critical moments of our lives we act without motive. I cannot get any account from myself; I never have been able to get any account from myself of why I made this speech. It was the most foolish and undignified thing I could have said. It was the finishing touch with Ashton. He got up and walked about for a minute, and then came and sat down by me again.

“I did not come here to be taunted and reproached,” he said; “it is too late for that. I have made every offer in my power, by letter, and have come here to try and see you and make the same offers. I offered to pledge myself never to see Mrs. Herries again. But you never opened my letters, nor would you see me. It is too late now to begin this kind of thing. You have treated me like a dog, and now you propose to commence playing the rôle of a jealous woman. ‘Pon my word, it is wonderful how different women are! Mrs. Herries has been my friend for five years, yet she never reproached me when I was bewitched by your beauty and left her for you; and when you got wrapped up in your work and cared to talk to no one but Svenski, and I went to see her, she met me with a smile. That’s what I call a kind, sensible woman. There is no managing you, for you seem to go by ideas that the world has nothing to do with; and you care for no one but

yourself. A man can't stand being treated like a dog too long. But Lady McCleod told me how ill you were, and I saw it was necessary to risk the results of coming to see you, and to try and explain things to you reasonably."

Oh, Agatha! Agatha! I did not think of her then; but I cannot help thinking of her now as I recall this phase of my life.

I listened so attentively to this speech that I had it in my heart; and yet I could not understand it. I was feeling, at that moment, only feeling; and I could not think. But the words sank into my mind, where they impressed themselves. The comparison drawn between Mrs. Herries and myself entirely failed to reach my intelligence; in fact, I did not understand it till long afterwards, although its superficial meaning came to me in a little while. All I understood at the moment was that Agatha and my husband had been making plans for me; that I was to go abroad with her, and that some kind of external reconciliation was to be arranged between me and Ashton. I rose to my feet and looked at him.

"I prefer to remain quietly in my own house," I said. "It cannot matter to you. Leave me alone; I never wish to see you or think of you again."

"By heaven!" he exclaimed, "it is too much. Stay, if you will; we have done all we can for you. But I swear if you stay here alone and receive your lovers, I will get a divorce and marry Flora Herries. She has a generous heart, whatever her other faults may be,"

He walked away quickly and did not even look after him. I went back into the house very slowly and went upstairs and lay down on my bed ; I was quite quiet and seemed hardly to know anything except that I was tired. It was still early in the morning, but I felt as if the day were over. And so it was indeed for me. I lay like one dazed, and lay so day after day. I don't know how many days passed, but at last Aunt Agatha came into my room and stood beside me.

"They tell me you seem better to-day," she said ;
"is it so ?"

I did not answer her, but only lay still with my eyes on her face. There was a pain in my head which seemed to prevent my speaking.

"Tell me how you feel ?" she said gently ; but still getting no answer she tried another plan. She took my hands and tried to raise me.

"Do get up and come into the air, child," she said.
"I am sure you would be better if you roused yourself."

I did lift myself and sat up ; and then I remembered what I wanted to say to Agatha.

"Why did you talk to Ashton ?" I demanded, "why did you say perhaps I would live with him again ? You must have known I never could do that !"

"I hoped you might," she said, almost in a whisper ; you are cutting your own throat, my dear ; everyone thinks it is of course you that are in fault ; the world always judges in that way."

"Oh, the world !" I exclaimed, "what has the world ever done for me that I should think of it or con-

sider its opinion ? Let me live according to my own conscience ; you and my mother always have been considering the world, and was it ever any good to you ? I cannot see it. You are always afraid, whereas I am afraid of nothing ! ”

“I know,” she said hesitatingly, “that you take a very lofty standpoint ; but then no one understands you, and I cannot see that you get any more benefit by your method than I do by mine. Women do not leave their husbands for such a cause as that for which you have left Ashton : at all events they do not make a scandal about it. Do for pity’s sake set things right while it is still possible ; let Ashton come here, or come back to town. You will repent it always if you do not.”

I was sitting up, resting my head on my hands. When she made this suggestion my mind went back to the meeting with Ashton in the garden, and I shuddered.

“No, no, it is impossible,” I said. Thinking of the meeting brought back the conversation ; my mind wandered over it and suddenly an idea came to me. I lifted my head.

“Tell me honestly, Aunt Agatha, if you can, how did Ashton know that Svenski came here ? ”

Agatha colored and her eyes fell. “Tell me ! ” I cried out imperiously.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You do know, Agatha,” I asserted.

“I know nothing about it positively——”

I seized her face with both hands and looked her straight in the eyes.

“I think,” she said doubtingly, “there must be some one watching the house.”

I dropped my hands. “So, that is what Ashton thinks of me! He knows me so little as that! He judges me by himself! Well,” I said bitterly and proudly, “let him have me watched. It does not matter to me.”

Aunt Agatha began to cry a little. I really think the poor woman had been crying over me so much before, that she was too exhausted now for more than a few tears.

“Is it of no use to speak to you, dear child?” she said.

“None,” I answered.

“I don’t think I can do any more with Ashton,” she said miserably. “I’m afraid this is the last chance. But remember, Lily, that you are at a disadvantage. You cannot divorce Ashton for what he has done; but if you compromise yourself in any way, it will all go against you. And he can divorce you for faithlessness. If you get talked about any more, you will find, when you are recovered and want to return to the world again no woman will speak to you. It is true; not because they are better than you, Heaven knows, but because they cannot afford to do it. You will be one of those notorious persons that a woman can’t speak to for fear of her own reputation.”

Her words all passed idly by me. How could I listen to such talk as this? I only looked at her, and she saw by my vacant gaze that her efforts were useless.

“Well, I must go,” she said, “it is useless my staying here now. I shall come again soon.”

She went away, and I said nothing. Poor Aunt Agatha I believe she spent half her life in the Flying Dutchman at this time, coming to London to see Ashton or me, and flying back to Scotland where her own duties lay.

I lay there dully, gazing at the chair where Agatha had sat. She had gone. Everyone had gone, and there was no one to come. After all, I was frightfully alone.

The desolation and the blank came on me with a sudden swiftness so that I could not mistake their reality. I had no work in hand—no picture to go to—I was quite alone with my thoughts. Everything appeared to be at an end with me. And so I lay there, dully looking at the chair where Agatha had sat.

CHAPTER XI.

THIS pathetic, weary sense of solitude passed by, as other moods passed by ; though it took weeks, indeed months, before I aroused from it in any way. I was numbed all this time ; silent, even in my heart, where I was conscious only of a ceaseless aching. But at last restlessness came, and I wanted movement. This was of course only natural. I have found since that one succumbs, and then one rises again, just as one in-breathes and out-breathes. It all seems to follow some hideous natural law, which one can chase down into the smallest physical or scientific facts. In time, if one looks at life in this way, resistance and struggle cease, and one accepts that which results from the combination of one's own character and of circumstances. The terrible thing is that we are born ignorant, and have to learn by such ghastly lessons of experience. No record teaches ; only life. And the experience of life carries the wretched being who has learned to think beyond the illusory comfort of all philosophy, beyond the mental rest which the inexperienced find in schemes and theories of life.

The most perfect, the greatest of these is as useless as the smallest. We can only observe facts and consider them ; time teaches us to recognize change and

recurrence and other characteristics of human nature ; when I say characteristics I mean in the sense that the ebb and flow of the sea may be said to be some of its characteristics. One always recovers from grief ; I did not know that then, and marvelled at the stir in myself, and the longing for movement. I thought of a saddle-horse, but I felt so weak and weary, I thought I should sway and fall from the saddle. Then I thought of what it would be like to be out in the fresh wind behind a pair of swift horses that would carry me forward as one is carried in a dream. It *was* a dream to me ; I had been so still, so much of a recluse, that I had to try and picture myself out and moving, and to fancy what it would be like to be in the quick air again, before I could determine to do anything. The first thing was to inquire into the condition of the stables. I knew nothing about them, nor about the household, for the matter of that. Fortunately for me, I had a housekeeper who was fond of me, or perhaps fond of her position ; I am grown so cynical and distrustful now that it would seem to me presumptuous to say she was fond of me. She was an admirable housekeeper, however ; and fortunately I had plenty of money. Thus there were no mundane cares to distract me from the bent of my life and mind. Perhaps if I had been poor, and had children, I might have been different—observe, my reader, that I am now quoting the kind of thing which people continually say, both men and women. Yet one fancies men ought to be sensible. Let us grant that character and circumstances make life ; and

life is a hard fact, the one nut we have to crack between our teeth, whether we will or not. I was rich and I had no children. Who could alter these circumstances? I might have given away my money or founded a crèche; but I preferred spending my money, and I did not like children. These are simply facts. The "if" people are more irritating than any other class of unreasonable talkers; and when I hear them I simply say to myself—

"If ifs and ands were pots and pans
The tinker would have no cares."

It is no use giving serious answers to foolish remarks. So I will merely reiterate my statement that I was rich, and free to follow the bent of my mental and emotional life. After thinking about my imaginary pair of horses for a long while I ultimately made inquiries, and found that the stables only contained the old carriage horses which were used for the station carriage; and a cob for the groom to go on errands. So it was evident I must buy my horses. Then came a bite and a twinge—Ashton understood horses—for the first time I missed him—positively missed him! and instead of sitting down and crying, which would no doubt have done me good, I got angry with myself and determined to get over this difficulty in some way—in any way. I have always felt that I ought to control circumstances, not that circumstances should control me. And I had sense enough to see that if I did not at once act and get over this initial difficulty I should be always hesitating, and always thinking of Ashton—and missing him! The

very idea humiliated and enraged me. I rang the bell and sent for the old coachman who had been Paul Phayre's servant. I asked him if he would go to London the next morning and get me a light phaeton and a pair of quick-stepping thoroughbreds. There came a gleam into the old man's clear blue eyes that was good to see. "Why, my dear," Aunt Agatha would have said, "Just think of the commission that man will make." What did I care? I told him he need not be very particular about price so long as he got the right sort of horses ; and that the phaeton must be of the very newest build, very light.

"I'll get them, ma'am," he said, "but I hope you will come up to London to see them. I wouldn't like the responsibility of actually bringing them home without your seeing them."

"Oh, no, I cannot be bothered," I said impatiently, "just get the thing done as quickly as possible."

"Well, of course I could get a horse changed if you didn't like him," he said, turning the affair slowly over in his mind.

"Certainly," I said quickly, "or the phaeton either. Go to Morgan's for that. I should like you to go up to town to-night, and don't keep me waiting longer than you can help."

The old man touched his forehead and smiled. I knew I was acting *en princesse*, but I did not care, nor did it matter to me what the man thought of me, or of his golden opportunity. We had some little talk about the price of the horses, and then I went back to my

studio, where I chiefly lived. I took a clean canvas and began to touch in a wild sketch—I will say nothing about it, but that it expressed movement and satisfied my restlessness. I chose a most difficult subject, so as to give zest to the sensation which work gave me. I clung to this, working till dark and beginning at dawn, afraid to leave it until I should hear my horses' feet outside. I sat for three days at it; at noon on the fourth day I heard my horses' feet, flung my brushes aside, and ran downstairs. There stood just what I wanted, as if spirited to the spot by some fairy (alas, money is the only fairy in this world!), a light phaeton, very elegant, and a pair of clean, well-made, spirited strawberries, rather large for the phaeton and a perfect match. The coachman stood waiting for me to speak.

“Let me try them before I say anything,” I cried. and went back to change my dress. It was done quickly; and I do not wonder my maid stared in wonder when I think that I was actually excited and full of eagerness. “Oh, for movement!” Yes, that is the kind of woman I was and am still I almost think; only that now I am older and I have tasted of the last hour, shod with fire from hell, that fire which shall soon consume me utterly.

The coachman got in behind, and I drove down the avenue. The gate stood open, and I could not resist it. At first I was timid, for my hands were of late so much more used to the palette and the brush than to the reins that I was not sure whether my wrists were strong enough yet. But I soon found how the horses answered

to me, and when we had turned into the road I let them go. There was a long wide road not far off, one I had often fancied myself driving along : a road with a common on one side and on the other a high bank of waving grasses over which were to be caught glimpses of distant blue country. I reached it, and the horses went swiftly along it, and the fresh air seemed to leap to my face ; I turned and drove back home. Old Rogers, the coachman, leaned forward.

“Do you like them, ma’am ?” he asked, “they’re a bit out of sorts with the journey.”

“Let me have them out at half-past ten to-morrow morning,” I said. “I’ll take them some distance, and then I’ll tell you.”

“Poor Rogers ! He did not get much conversation out of me. My eyes were fixed on a far-off haze of violet blue that lay on the horizon ; my face was burning with the sense of fresh air and strong wind. I got out at the steps of the house and went upstairs to look at my picture and see if there was enough movement in it ; and then to lie on a couch and let a faint pleasant sense of languor steal over me ; and then to actually take a book from the shelf and open it. I could not read, but the mere action made me wonder. Was it possible I was waking to life again ?”

How selfish we all are. Of course I ought to have gratified Rogers by a long conversation, to have seen the horses in their stalls, to have inspected them all over. And yet why ? Many people would have done all this, but only because they would like a long conversation

about horses, and would like handling them, and would be interested in a new possession. I was only interested in the effect of my new possession on myself; we each do as we like, that is all. But this is a truism. I am only explaining how the fresh sensation acted on me. I began to see my way through the misery of solitude to its subtle richness. I have known solitude in both its aspects—in that of the inexorable teacher—

“If from society we learn to live,
'Tis solitude should teach us how to die;
It hath no flatterers; Vanity can give
No hollow aid—”

This aspect I know well, but I know another too, which I cannot find marked in Byron; for he prays for nature or “one fair spirit.” But in positive solitude, in actually dwelling alone, with only thoughts in your mind or in books, there comes at a certain point a deep sense of pleasure, and a deep desire never to be harassed or disturbed by men or women again. I was beginning to feel this; not until lately have I found it possible to discover this sense of pleasure when quite alone with thoughts. I was young then, and needed nature and the stir of movement. Perhaps, if Byron had lived—but stay—I will say no more of this, for the old age of a poet or a beautiful woman are to me subjects which cannot be touched on without grief.

The next day I was out with my horses all the morning; I painted all the afternoon; I read all the evening, So the days passed uncounted. There was a fine library at the Court, collected by Paul and his father; and new

tracks or thought and study opened up to me as I lay here through the long evenings. I dreaded being disturbed by anyone ; but at last of course Agatha came—with a lecture.

“My dear,” she said, why do you drive about so much alone? Don’t you know how much noticed you are, and how the people watch you? Why I heard about your strawberry horses up in Scotland.”

“Well, I don’t notice the people or watch *them*,” I said, “why cannot they leave me alone? I am sure I am living as harmless a life as it is possible to live.”

“My dear, a woman of your appearance and notoriety can’t do anything harmless ; the less there is to say about her the worse it is I believe, for people invent.”

“Then I reiterate what I have said before, that it is just as well to do as one likes and take no notice of the world.”

I saw she had something she wanted to ask me about ; but I would give her no chance. However, the next day when the horses were brought round she came out with it.

CHAPTER XII.

SHE drew me back into the breakfast-room.

“Why have you given up taking Rogers?” she said.

“or, at least, why don’t you take a groom?”

“How do you know I don’t take one?” I demanded.

“I—I have heard of it.”

“Oh, indeed, the spies are still at work. Very likely Rogers himself reports. But what is the use of troubling about these things? I prefer to be alone when I am out in the country.”

“But you know it is unusual and gets noticed.”

“Oh!” I said, rather impatiently, I fear, “I don’t notice these people about here; I never think of them. If they notice me they must have very little else to think of.”

“Don’t you know Captain Pontifex?” she asked, after a moment’s hesitation.

“I never heard of him.”

“He is reputed to know you very well.”

“That ought to show you what gossip is worth.”

“It ought to show you how dangerous it is to lay yourself open to gossip.”

“In what lies the danger?”

“Well, I will tell you. Already your name is coupled

with that of Captain Pontifex, and people say that if he does not visit here you certainly meet him when you are out."

"What!" I exclaimed. "When I don't even know the man! Have never seen him!"

"I believe you when you say that," said Agatha. "But people in general believe the story."

"But I have never seen him," I repeated.

"Think," she said. "It may have all grown out of one small incident. Not that any good would be done now—except by your going back—" she stopped and then went on, "Think; Captain Pontifex rides about the country constantly. He is a tall, broad-shouldered man with a heavy brown moustache, that curls at the ends; he is very handsome, and has the most charming manners—"

"Oh, the man that stopped the horses one day when the train frightened them. Oh, yes, I know him by sight, and spoke to him then."

Agatha turned and looked at me.

"Only then?"

"He stopped me once afterwards, when I was on a road strange to me, to tell me it was not safe for the horses."

Agatha's eyelids quivered and drew together. For the first time I saw she did not believe me. The sense of this hurt me so bitterly that the pain seemed quite unbearable at the moment, and I stood speechless. She did not speak again for some minutes, and then in a very low voice,

“He is so well known—he is a notorious profligate—for his name to be coupled with any woman’s is fatal—oh, you are mad—you are mad. I do implore you, go back to Ashton.”

“I think, Aunt Agatha,” I said coldly, though my heart was beating furiously with anger, “it would be better for us not to meet, if the talk is always to be like this, and if you do not believe what I say. I have no object in telling you a lie.”

“Then why do it now?” she asked, quickly, as if with sudden hope.

“I have not done it!” I cried out. “Aunt Agatha, I will not endure this. I would rather be alone.”

I went out and got into the carriage and drove away. I never took a servant with me now. These long solitary drives of mine were a keen pleasure to me, and I had learned the country so well that I needed no one to tell me the way. It was delightful to be out for hours alone driving along these quiet country roads where, as it had seemed to me, I never met anyone. For this “handsome, broad-shouldered” man had never attracted my attention. This is the fact; I knew him by sight, without noticing him, if I may be allowed to use such an expression. This was what I expected Aunt Agatha to understand; she, who knew me so well, who knew my independent nature, to be capable of thinking I should tell her such a lie as this! Such an unnecessary lie, as it seemed to me. However, gossip had done its usual devil’s work: it had separated me from Agatha; it had made me mad with anger at its injustice; it had

made me perfectly aware who Captain Pontifex was.

“Have I not had my brain sear’d, my heart riven,
Hopes sapp’d, name blighted, Life’s life lied away?”

Those lines burned in my memory as I drove along. My habit of living alone with books so much has made me often think in the words of those greater than myself; and doubtless the critics will say that this record is a pot-pourri made up out of the writings of others. But the critics do not matter now, as they did matter seventy or eighty years ago, when the flowers of our grand nation, the little group of young-old, triumphant, desperate poets had for the moment to stand or fall by the words of these gentlemen. Now all this is changed, and, as in the theatre, it is not the critics in the stalls or the newspaper articles they write which decide the fate of a play, but “the house” the public itself—so in the world of letters. The public has asserted itself there also; therefore it is to my reader, not to my critic, that I say if this work is a pot-pourri what does it matter! It makes it none the less real. Everyone who thinks goes to the book-shelf; it is not possible to live in the fullest sense without thinking, and therefore reading. Sensation *alone* is nothing. Therefore I believe my reader, the only sort of reader who will read this record through, will not complain because I found myself beating against the same bars as great authors of all ages; touching, in my life of to-day the same points of emotion and despair that they touched. I am not writing a romance, or a fable, or anything new; it is all old,

quite old, in spite of the fact that it is always being chronicled, and that Dumas, Daudet, Bourget are telling the old tale in the modern fashion. My only claim is that I am telling a true tale, without any veil over it; the tale of all my days and hours, and times and ways and words. Do you remember, my reader, these bitter words said by one who was too sensitive to live—"O, that something fortunate had ever happened to me or my brothers! then I might hope, but despair is forced upon me as a habit." These words too were in my mind. They were spoken by a sensitive creature whom the beef-eating Englishmen called morbid. That word is supposed to settle everything. I have been called morbid. Well, if I am I was born so. And I am in excellent company. I am not unique; nature makes types, not individuals; she only varies the number, making creatures of some types innumerable, others scantier, some in such small quantity as to be rare. But go to the other side of the earth, however rare you are, and somewhere is to be found another of your kin. Ever our lives, as well as the people who live them, are duplicated, though in outward circumstances they may appear different. The author we love has a mysterious power over us by expressing our own inexpressible thoughts; and mysterious indeed is the power over you of a person who recognizes you ever so little—who can say to you, "you know"—and to whom you can answer, "I know." But now I am thinking of a later hour when "sweet was life to hear and sweet to smell." To-day I knew nothing but pain and anger;

I felt that despair was being forced on me as a habit. What could I do? How escape? Escape! From what? from the "Great Nemesis"? I, a child, a mere wilful child, struggle with the fates and furies that make of human life order, or disorder; chaos absolute as it seems to me now, in spite of the physical, emotional, social laws which steadily work in it. Submit to those laws, and it is possible to live—rebel—think for yourself—and immediately all is chaos. All hope is gone beneath.

"The blight of life—the demon Thought."

But I was only beginning to rebel—beginning to think for myself—as yet. I had still an ideal, a hope. Each hour, each day tended to draw these from me; but when I met Captain Pontifex that morning it was out of mere bravado that I reined in my horses. Now I would do such a thing simply from indifference—from the knowledge that nothing matters, that it is all one whatever we do; but then I did it out of reckless bravado. What I did was surprisingly innocent, considering how I am apologizing for it; but nevertheless it created a subsequent situation which I suppose the worldly person would say I ought to have foreseen. I pulled up and said "Good-morning" to Captain Pontifex, who looked at me half-smilingly, half seriously, and carefully watching me for his cue—even I saw that, in spite of my inexperience, and it made me impatient at last, so that after a few minutes' conversation I bid him good-bye and passed on. I had observed a carriage drive along a cross-road and Captain Pontifex smile as the occu-

pants craned their necks in our direction ; but I only thought to myself how vulgar such curiosity was. I drove on with a certain sense of pleasure in having shown even to myself that I was not to be so readily intimidated.

I got home, rather dejected, why I knew not, except that my foolish bit of bravado had been followed by a reaction, and I seemed to find the house very quiet without Agatha. For she had gone, while I was out, as I expected. Poor Agatha ! I try sometimes to see all these events from her point of view, and I can perceive how headstrong and unreasonable I must have appeared to her. The world we live in wore a totally different aspect to Agatha from what it wore to me ; and nothing could reconcile our two points of view.

And now I was alone, quite alone ; having driven my last friend away I was free to do as I liked, without even hearing a comment on my actions. I was distinctly aware of this situation, and, being so, felt no desire to act in any way—a dull apathy settled on me, and I felt sadder than I had ever yet felt in my life. Sadness was new to me. I had been passionate, desperate, most miserable ; but now for the first time I felt the strange melancholy of sadness. It was the sense of the deep loneliness in which I now was that induced this. My heart was vacant. Oh, how sad that is ! People talk of the mischief idle fingers find to do—but that is nothing to the possibilities which arise from a heart being vacant. An ideal may be enshrined which at another time would be regarded with horror.

Perhaps I had better at once say, lest the experienced novel-reader should suppose that I am apologizing beforehand for falling in love with Captain Pontifex, that I did not fall in love with him. I never gave him a thought after the world had done its usual evil work, and separated Agatha, my one friend, from me, by a perfectly groundless slander. He had served his purpose in my life's drama, and disappeared from it. What I began to think about now was to wonder whether it would be considered very improper of me if I went off and travelled alone with my maid. I sat there all the long evening dreaming about this ; but at last as I rose to go to bed, I felt I should not do it. I had not recovered sufficiently to have as much enterprise as this required. My horses, and the fresh country roads were all I needed as yet. The next morning I was out earlier than usual, driven to nature by the sense of loneliness in my house.

I tried to go a new road, from a simple desire for change. I knew all the neighborhood by heart, and the choice of roads was limited. There was one very steep road which had always attracted me, and now I determined to climb it for the sake of a new horizon.

Well, I went on this road, and after a while found I had to climb a really terrible hill, and that the road, too, was crooked and awkward. I saw how awkward it would be to come down, but I did not realize this until the road had become so narrow I did not like to risk turning. So on the horses climbed, and I thought to myself that I had one consolation—I really did not care

much if I was thrown out and killed. Of course this was nonsense, for I had not really reached that stage of feeling yet; but that was how I fancied I felt. I thought life was valueless to me, so it was in a sense, because I had no interests; but I was capable of awaking to new interests, as we shall see, if I ever succeed in telling my story, and do not stay too long by the way making comments.

When I reached the top of the hill I found I commanded a glorious view; so I pulled up the horses to let them rest, and to look round me. A few minutes later and I heard a horse coming up behind me; it was old Rogers, the coachman, who had followed me. I was annoyed, but I had sense enough not to show it. He looked rather grave.

“It is a pity you have driven up here, madam,” he said, “for the road really is too steep for those spirited horses. Whichever way you go down from here you have as bad a descent. I wonder if you are strong enough to hold the horses up. Won’t you allow me to drive you down.”

“No, thank you, Rogers, no,” I answered lightly, “I can take care of the horses, I assure you. It was worth while driving up here only to see the view.”

“Yes, it is very fine, ma’am. Do you see that house and chapel in the valley? It is the Merrions’—but I suppose you know all about them and the house.”

“No,” I said, “Tell me, for I know nothing about the people who live here. I don’t know the Merrions’ house or chapel, nor have I ever heard of them. I can’t

see the house from any of the other roads, it is so banked by trees."

"And yet, ma'am, it is quite close to the Court," he said; "those two fields are all that separate the grounds, and that line of trees that goes along the fields shelters a walk that leads from one house to the other. Mr. Paul Phayre, who used to live there, was an intimate friend of the Merrions, and in his time the pathway was often used. But you surely know, ma'am, that Merrion House is very old; an historical sort of building, as I've heard. And its old Catholic chapel too! It's reckoned one of the great sights in this county."

I began now vaguely to remember Paul Phayre mentioning it to me; but since the Court had been my own I had never felt any interest in anything beyond its walls, and the lawn just outside the window, where the blackbirds and thrushes had seemed like company in my solitude, so that this information interested me. I asked some questions, and Rogers told me the history of Merrion House and that of the Court, which was also a very old house. I knew all about the Court, but the old servant had a loquacious, pleasant way of talking, so I did not interrupt him. The Merrions, he told me, were an old Catholic family, well known in history as staunch supporters of the faith; ready to fight or die for it. "They are the same as ever," he said, "though there is no fighting or dying for the faith now-a-days. But they have a priest all to themselves, and give their money to the church. I hear Mr. Arthur Merrion is engaged to be married to a young French lady, not yet

out of the convent, belonging to a family even older and more distinguished than his own. I believe he has never seen her. It is wonderful what a religion will make gentlemen like that do. We poor folk can't pretend to understand it."

I had no answer which I cared to make to this reflection, and I thought the conversation had lasted long enough; so I took up the reins. Old Rogers put his hand on the carriage.

"For God's sake, ma'am, don't drive down this hill yourself!" he exclaimed. I drew my eyebrows together and looked at him.

"Let me take the horses down, ma'am, and you walk," he said, with an earnestness I had never seen in him before. But I was not in the humor to appreciate the old servant's anxiety and consideration.

"Why?" I said, "I am not accustomed to be interfered with."

"I must beg you to excuse me, ma'am," he said even more earnestly. "I cannot help it. Let me take the horses."

There was a tone as of a hen over her duckling now in his voice that irritated me; it made me think of Agatha. "No," I exclaimed, "You shall not. I am going to drive them down myself. Why, these horses would hardly endure another hand now, they are so used to me. I can do anything with them."

"Pray, do not drive them down the hill," he said in an imploring tone; "you don't know the danger."

"Come," I said angrily, "what can it possibly mat-

ter to you whether I am thrown out or not? Take your hand from the carriage. I am going to drive on and you may suffer if you do not let go."

I was so angry now it was all I could do to prevent myself from knocking his hand from the carriage with my whip. I am not going to apologize for myself, or to try and make things appear any better than they were. I was not reasonable, I know. But I never have been reasonable. This incident is quite typical of my course through life. The fact was, I suspected Agatha had spoken to Rogers, or even perhaps my husband, that he had been bidden to watch me was my idea; and it maddened me. Why should these people make a virtue of guarding my life when they had spoiled it? In my rage at the thought that my servant was perhaps really the servant of Ashton Harcourt, I did a foolish thing; I flicked his horse and made it start aside and drew the whip over the backs of my horses, a signal they answered too instantly, and with the reins I roused them so effectually that in a moment they were tearing down the other side of the hill we had ascended. Very quickly after the folly was committed I became aware of the danger of the road I was on, and putting aside my whip took the reins in both hands. The road was not only steep, but only half made with rugged places in it, and on the left side the hill went quickly down, so that at any moment the carriage might swerve and then there would be an end. I would have tried to check the horses, but that I heard Rogers galloping behind me; so I determined to simply guide them and endeavor to

get safely to the bottom of the hill. Indeed there was really nothing else to be done ; to check the horses would have been very difficult. I was very near the bottom of the hill—I could see the broad, smooth road on to which this rugged one entered, and I could see a carriage and pair on the broad road ; my mind was intent on the calculation of how best to turn the awful corner at the speed my horses were going, and how to avoid that carriage !—which way to turn, how soon the carriage would have passed the end of the road or not—when suddenly I became entirely unconscious, being aware only for a brief second of a sense of the solid earth falling away from under my feet.

What had happened was that the carriage had plunged into a deep rut and swerved. It had not gone over, but I was shot right out of it on to the grassy side of the road, while the horses went tearing on, even more excited.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN I opened my eyes again I looked straight into another pair of eyes. They were large, dark, soft eyes, with a tenderness and delicacy of expression that interested my wandering and vacant mind. I had never seen such eyes before, and I think the artist awoke first in me. I know that my first conscious thought was "How I should like to paint those eyes." I gazed, my eyelids, which longed to close from weariness and exhaustion, held open by surprise and interest. I saw that these beautiful eyes were in a young man's face—not a woman's, as I had expected. The face was not very handsome, but had an air of distinction about it that gave it a charm; it was very pale, and the hair and the moustache, which, to my regret as an artist, hid the mouth, were intensely black—blue-black. The exertion of taking all this in exhausted my strength and I sank back into unconsciousness.

When I again recovered I felt much stronger and could look round me. I was in a large, cool, flower-scented room lying on a wide old-fashioned couch, which was covered with some old brocade. This attracted my attention, it was so pretty, and I put out my hand to touch it. Immediately my hand was taken by another and looking up I saw a lady bending over

me. She was very sweet-looking, with large, dark liquid eyes and dark hair.

“You are better,” she said. “I am so glad. You have quite frightened us.”

I really was better, and as she spoke I raised myself and sat up. Then I saw that just behind her was the young man with the wonderful eyes ; evidently her son.

“I should like to know where I am,” I said slowly.

“You are in Merrion House,” she said, smiling at my puzzled manner, I suppose. “Don’t you remember coming down that dreadful hill? You were thrown out.”

“Oh, are the horses hurt?” I exclaimed.

“No, I believe not,” she answered. “They were stopped on the road and have been taken home. You got the worst of it ; I was terribly afraid you were really hurt. My son and the coachman carried you down the hill and we brought you here.”

“Oh, then it was your carriage I saw ? I remember being so afraid I should dash against it,” I said, my mind going back to that awful last moment of consciousness.

“Yes, but fortunately we escaped, and indeed the whole thing has ended much better than I ever hoped. Now, Arthur, fetch Mrs. Harcourt a glass of champagne. She is just fit to take it ; and I really believe she is all right. Two doctors have been sent for, Mrs. Harcourt. Your servant went off for one and I sent for another. I hope by the time they come you will be quite well.”

My mind was wandering about and I could scarcely

attend to her words. It was so long since I had been in any house but my own that the sensation was quite novel. So this pleasant drawing-room was in the old house Rogers had been telling me about; and this dark-eyed, sweet-faced woman was Mrs. Merrion; and that young man with the gazelle-like eyes was Arthur Merrion, who was engaged to a French girl; and these kind people were Roman Catholics and had a chapel and a priest of their own. This was just how the thoughts passed through my head; I was vaguely and rather pleasantly interested. I had never been interested in any Roman Catholics, never having been sufficiently intimate with any to wonder what effect their religion might have upon their lives. But these people were so kind, so gentle, so graceful and distinguished in manner, with just the attributes that woke my artistic sense, that I immediately began to reflect over all that Rogers had told me, and to look at them with interest. These were the first human beings who had interested me since that night when I had seen Mrs. Herries at the opera; so it may be imagined that the sensation was an acceptable one. Human interest is the one thing that preserves life; and this came to me just in time. I had preyed upon myself long enough, and I recognized the fact now that I was with these pleasant, cultured people. Arthur Merrion brought me the champagne and I drank it slowly, while they talked to me, and together, in low attuned voices which were in complete harmony with the quiet of the room and its delicate flower scents. Just as I was languidly revelling

in this new sensation of quiet content an unutterable sense of weakness overcame me ; all I knew was that I was falling forwards. As a matter of fact I simply sank on to the floor from the couch, spilling the wine, and lay there as unconscious as though I were dead. The two doctors arrived just then and entered upon this scene ; this of course was fatal. I was carried upstairs under their joint auspices, undressed and put between rose-petal scented sheets. This I know because I smelled the fragrance when I began to recover in spite of the various medicaments which had been used on my face, and the brandy that had been forced between my teeth. I awoke to a sense of complete contentment of a peculiar kind, which I believe is unknown to those persons who have never been very ill or completely exhausted. All restlessness or wish for movement had gone from me, and I only desired to stay just as I was, without even moving a finger. I therefore played the thoughtless hypocrite as sick people often do, and kept my eyes closed some time after my consciousness had returned. Presently, however, I was roused to greater activity of mind by a strange touch and voice. "She is all right now," said the voice.

I opened my eyes, curiosity conquering languor, and saw two strange men whom I immediately concluded to be the two doctors Mrs. Merrion had spoken of ; and she herself, and a woman-servant stood there with them. I imagined I had frightened them all a good deal, from the scene, and I tried to be reassuring and smiled. Mrs. Merrion came to me and kissed me. The doctors

turned and went out of the room together. I heard one say to the other, "It's the nervous shock."

"Are the horses hurt?" I said to Mrs. Merrion. She crossed the room and opened the door.

"Arthur," she said, "Mrs. Harcourt has asked again about the horses. I wish you would go up to the Court and see them, so that we can tell her positively they are all right. It won't do to let her worry about anything."

This brought my mind round from the horses to the gazelle-eyed young man. I did not feel any desire to see him, but I did like to think of him. His was the most attractive face I had ever seen, and I liked to call it up before me, with its expression of gentle melancholy and high-bred quietude.

I will be candid with you, my reader, and tell you that I did fall in love with Arthur Merrion. But you must follow me through the history of that love, for it is a very curious one.

I did not rise again from that sweet-scented bed all that day, but lay in a half-weary half-contented dimness of mind and weakness of body, right on into the night, unquestioning, scarcely thinking, sometimes half-asleep, sometimes but half-conscious. I saw the servant, Mrs. Merrion's maid, and Mrs. Merrion herself often by my bedside; and often through the night. At the quite early dawn I suddenly woke out of a sleep and saw Mrs. Merrion standing by me; and whether I was dreaming or delirious I know not but I cried out, "Oh, mother! mother! why have I not a mother?" and she took me in her arms and held me close and kissed me, and I fell

asleep again. When I awoke to the broad daylight I fancied this was all a dream ; but it was not, for she reminded me of it long afterwards, and for a strange purpose.

When I had had some tea I fancied myself quite well and proposed to get up and go home. I said this to the maid, who immediately went in great consternation to tell her mistress. Mrs. Merrion came and persuaded me to lie still a little longer. When she was in the room I was content and quiet. She came in and out during the morning, and at last said I might try getting up and then see if I could go downstairs to lunch. I was glad at this, for I thought I should then see Arthur Merrion ; and I wanted to. I wanted to find out why I was so interested in him.

You see, my reader, that it is I who stand under the command ;

“Thou shalt tell all thy days and hours, and tell
Thy times and ways and words of love, and say
How one was dear and one desirable.”

I stand under this command by no outer obligation but by the force of my own nature. The burden of sad sayings is too heavy on me, and I must share it with the world. Of my lovers and of the men and women I have come in contact with I can only tell what I have been, and what they have been to me. Of myself I will try to tell the whole as far as is possible ; to search my heart and write down the history of my emotions. I still am an enigma to myself, therefore I cannot pretend to explain others ; for it is quite certain

that a human being, except of the most wooden order, presents different sides of their character to different people they come in contact with. That is one of the manifold reasons why we are so inexplicable. The persons of whom I have written so far are all fairly intelligible ; look at things from their point of view, and one can discover their motives for action. But then it was just possible to look at things from what seems to be their point of view (though one can never be sure). But in Arthur Merrion there was a subtlety of character which defied observation ; I was never able to probe his mind ; and to this hour I cannot say whether he was good or evil, whether it was God or Devil (if either exist) which dominated him chiefly. I ought not to say so much about him here ; but having said so much I must tell you before I go on, that he was, and I suppose is, quite the best man, the man with most goodness in him that I have ever known. I think I have already told my reader that I do not know what goodness is ; but whatever it is, it existed in Arthur Merrion.

I got up and dressed, and was surprised to find how long it took me and how weak I was. But I was able to go downstairs and sit at the table in the quiet, shady dining-room. How deep a quiet there is about these old English houses ! The thick solidity of the walls, the broad stairways, the rich old oak, the beauty of the architecture, give a sense of rest such as one feels in no other building. These are permanent homes ; not places for a sojourn of a year or so. This atmosphere soothed and pleased me ; it existed at the Court, and

had much to do with my love for that place, but it was much stronger at Merrion House. Perhaps this was because the inmates had such worshipful feeling for it. Even on so slight an acquaintance I could see that the house and the family were objects of profound respect and reverence to Arthur Merrion and his mother.

I observed Arthur Merrion very carefully during lunch, and came to the conclusion that he certainly interested me and I him.

All through my acquaintance with him I committed one of those follies which the wisest of us commit at times. His society gave me pleasure, and I drew out the side of his character which interested me. I forgot that there was that other side which did not interest me—his devotion to his family and his religion. I forgot it, that is to say, later on when I wanted to forget it!—for I have come to the conclusion that we ourselves and our own temperaments are the arbiters of what we call our destiny. Circumstances are nowhere in this consideration, for the simple reason that a person of strong will or fierce passions will break through any given set of circumstances and create new ones. It was my own temperament which made me drive headlong down that hill, as it was my own temperament which had made me leave Ashton, and become the unhappy creature, joyless, who was known as the notorious Mrs. Ashton Harcourt. I lay no blame on God or Providence, be it observed, or any other convenient abstraction. We each create our own lives, and the combination of these lives makes the world the bad place it is.

For we are all bad and the "hungry generations," as they follow each other, pass on the evil and would increase it if they could. But they cannot; the world seems to be like a chemical combination made at the commencement with so much of good and bad, of high and low, of knowledge and ignorance, and it is continually balancing itself and keeping the forces even. That there should be so much good and bad, knowledge and ignorance in the world at the same time, may be just as necessary to the existence of human beings with minds and morals, as any of the physical laws which we see acting are necessary to the existence of the natural world itself.

I wondered very much why these people were so kind to me, why Mrs. Merrion was so gentle and so sweet. I had learned to look on all my neighbors as my natural enemies since I first took possession of the Court. I soon guessed, however, that Mrs. Merrion's religion made her take me in and befriend me when perhaps others would have hesitated. Good Catholics are very generous in the every-day affairs of life. And why? Because they believe if they are not, St. Peter will close the gates against them in spite of munificence to the church. Ah, well, why do I talk like this now? I thought little indeed of the religion of these kind people in that happy hour, spent over the luncheon table. I only wondered whether Mrs. Merrion really liked me. I concluded she did, and I learned afterwards that it was so indeed, that I fascinated and interested her. If this will explain what I mean better than what I have said, I was then just the woman she

would have given a great deal to have as a daughter and a companion if I had been of the true religion. But being what I was, a married woman living away from her husband, and the "notorious Mrs. Ashton Harcourt," it was just this religion and its teaching of charity for future reward which alone supported her in gratifying her natural desire to befriend me. Worldly motives would have led her to send me home on a shutter from the green hill-side; but with her existed that curious complication of character which arises from "other-worldly" motives.

We had the pleasantest talk imaginable, which was an enjoyment to us all, for the life the Merrions led was sufficiently lonely, while mine was that of the recluse. The society of cultured persons is always delightful under such circumstances. We lingered long, unwilling to break the charm that lay on us by moving. At half-past three I summoned my courage and said, "I think now I am quite able to go home, Mrs. Merrion."

"Do you mean it?" she said.

"Yes, indeed. I am very, very happy here, but I have no longer an excuse to stay."

"May I come and see your studio to-morrow?" she asked after a moment's hesitation. The words seemed forced from her. Prudence and the desire for pleasure were fighting against each other in her. I knew then I had really won her heart, so far as it could be won.

"Oh, please do," I answered. "But why not this afternoon, and have tea with me?"

She looked at Arthur Merrion and then said decidedly, "I should like it. I wonder if you feel strong enough to walk home by the path through the shrubberies? You know there is a path which connects the two houses? It is a very long drive round and would, I think, tire you more than the walk."

"I have never explored that path," I said, "and should very much like to do so. I feel sure I can walk."

She rose saying she must countermand some order—or make some arrangement—I forget what—if she was going out. I got up to go, and put on my hat. As I rose Arthur Merrion rose and came close to me.

"May I come?" he asked. The question was serious. I had not given him any direct invitation.

"Why, of course," I answered unsteadily. "Please do." Why was my voice shaken as I spoke? It was shaken by something—a breath of different air?—the force of a current?—whatever you like to call it—I have no name for it. That man had the power to make me quiver when he came near me, not with passion, not with any power over the senses, but with a keen, wild, sweet emotion. Ah! he was dear to me! dear! I would have shed my blood for him very gladly. I knew my presence shook him also; I was just conscious of it, but little more. I could not observe or study him much, with these soft waters of fresh emotion suddenly making green my barren heart.

Is all this magnetism? I only ask; I have no answer.

I went quickly from the room and came back again in my driving coat, but without my hat, which had been crushed. I laughed as I related my misfortune in this respect as we all stood at the open French window.

“If you are afraid of cold,” said Mrs. Merrion, “I will get you some lace. But it does not matter at all otherwise, the path is quite hidden, and it is only like walking through the garden.”

“Oh, I am not afraid of cold,” I said. So we walked out of the open window, across the lawn and plunged into the shrubberies. The path was just wide enough for two ; and Mrs. Merrion and I walked side by side, Arthur Merrion following us, with a great hound which seemed to attend him everywhere as a matter of course. When we came to the fields the path went up to the hedge, and another high hawthorn hedge screened it on the inner side, the tallest branches waving overhead against the sky. These fields were the Merrion’s property, and Mrs. Merrion was very proud of the high hawthorn hedges which she had succeeded in growing and preserving, in spite of the county being a fox-hunting one. Everywhere else, as she told me, she had had to submit to popular feeling and keep the hedges low ; but the old legends about this pathway had appealed to the sympathies even of the fox-hunting squires, and she had been allowed to keep the old hawthorns which grew up to the lower branches of the great old trees that stood here and there in the hedges. At the end of the fields we came to a wicket-gate, which I had often walked to, but never thought of walking

beyond. It admitted us to my own shrubberies and presently we emerged upon my lawn. We entered the house at my morning-room window which, stood wide open as usual. As we went in it seemed to me as if a great gulf separated me from the last time I had been there, and as if I had entered upon a new life. And so indeed I had.

We lingered, talking about the traditions of the Court, for Mrs. Merrion loved to dwell on these old memories ; and then went up to my studio. Here I discovered my new friends in a new light. Both were intelligent appreciators of art. When I say this I say what probably no one but an artist or an intelligent appreciator will understand. It is no wonder that we who work in earnest shut our doors upon the ordinary crowd, who know as much about art as do the urchins that gather round an artist sketching in the country. What a pleasure it was to have these people in my studio ! They were familiar with the Vatican collection, and the private collections in Rome and Genoa and elsewhere ; they had visited the Orvieto chapel and studied its Fresco of the Resurrection—they knew the Louvre as picture lovers know it, and, wonder of wonders ! (being English) knew the treasures of the National Gallery. And they had seen all these things with eyes that could see. But do not be afraid, my reader, I have promised not to write about art. It is too late in the day, now, when I am writing and gathering up the threads of my life. I write not as an artist but as a woman.

What a happy afternoon that was ! Arthur Merrion roused me to life, but it seemed to me a nobler life than I had ever known of before, save in my solitary self. His face, as he turned it towards me, was alight with a fine enthusiasm ; it grew positively beautiful to my eyes. I saw no passion in his face, none of the coarse passion which had wearied me of the thought of love. We had tea by the open window of my studio ; and when they rose to leave me I sat there in the twilight, dreaming—dreaming—dreaming ! Ah ! those dreams ! I half-yielded, half-resisted, the new stirring of my heart. Why should I altogether resist it, I asked myself. Was it not awakening the best part of me, the imaginative, idealistic side of my nature ? Why should I suppress these ? I have always faced my own feelings without disguise, and I did not hide from myself the attraction Arthur Merrion had for me. But I knew he was engaged ; I knew I was married ; I had confidence in myself. Do not laugh at this, my reader ; my confidence in myself was not wholly misplaced, as you will at once suppose. It was deeply shaken, I allow ; but then my acquaintance with Arthur Merrion brought such experiences as shook my faith in everything, from the throne of God to the truth of my own heart. I thought, in my folly, I had drunk the dregs of that strange cup we get of mingled love and misery and despair ; but it remained for Arthur Merrion to make me drink deeply of it ; and even he had not the power to make me drain the dregs.

CHAPTER XIV.

I WAS very weak for some time after this accident ; and did not go out at all. The horses were all right, as Arthur Merrion had assured me while I was at Merrion House ; and they stood in their stalls and ate their heads off, except when Rogers took them out exercising. But he did not like driving them much ; he said I had made them wild ! I sat all day in my studio or in the morning-room, and there received many a delightful visit from Mrs. Merrion alone, or from herself and her son together. There was something in the character of these two, especially in the mother, which quieted me very much ; she was like the house she dwelt in, strong in built-up buttresses. I felt her religion always, though she seldom spoke of it. Probably just the same influence would have come to me from her son but for the magnetism or electric current—or call it what you will—which continually passed between us and made me aware only of this side of his nature. From my present standpoint I can see that he must have been chiefly aware only of that side of my nature ; which should explain much and excuse some of what happened afterwards. But at the time I was convinced he saw me as the woman I am. Nothing could be more foolish than that sentence I have just written, for since I am an enigma

to myself what else can I be to others? But no other words will express my meaning, so I will let the sentence stand. The sum and substance of it all is that Arthur and I understood each other not at all, and idealized each other a great deal on our separate lines, and so fell into a fool's paradise. I think this is the history of most affairs of the heart.

Mrs. Merrion went away on a visit, and at the accustomed hour of the afternoon call she and her son payed to me, her son came alone through the garden. He came in without comment, and I received him without comment. It would indeed have been ridiculous to make any : although my intuition told me that this was the commencement of something fresh. Why don't we use our intuition more? It is a neglected sense, that is all, and more accurate than any oracle. But perhaps it is because it warns us of danger that we do not care to use it. We live for sensation only ; and danger, pain, despair, all are part of what we live for. Looking back I can see that I should always have done just what I have done, even if I could have known what fierce suffering it would bring me.

Arthur Merrion sat down by me and talked, in his gentle way, a manner that I cannot help thinking must have endeared him to any woman. It was winning to the last degree. Women cannot be blamed who are won by such a manner. There are so many brutes in the world—mere ploughman lovers—men like Captain Pontifex and—yes I could see it as soon as I was under the spell of Arthur Merrion's charm—men like Ashton Har-

court, are but as brutes to a woman of my keen, sensitive, intense temperament. In the thrilling and yet peaceful atmosphere that I dwelt in when in Arthur Merrion's company I lived a new life. Day after day passed and still he came. We talked of art, of books, of a hundred things in which our tastes were sympathetic. At that time I could read Tennyson and Wordsworth, his favorite poets. My heart was not so embittered but what their gentle words had some meaning to me. And when he read to me, the peculiar melancholy of his temperament filled the verses with a fuller sweetness than they owned. He never read me *Locksley Hall*; and I never asked him to. Other books—my daily companions, hitherto—lay on my table or stood on the shelves close to my hand; but he never touched them. Byron, Swinburne, even Shelley and Keats, were outside his horizon. But, ah! how pleasant was the plot of mental ground into which he led me. It was surrounded by thick hedges, and only one soft bit of sky was visible; but it was like a dream-spot, full of sweet fancies and melancholy pleasure. My heart melted in this soft atmosphere; nothing was seen vividly or acutely in it. Arthur Merrion did not use his brain to think with, and therefore he stilled mine and gave me rest. He took me to their chapel, and showed me its ancient beauties of architecture. The organist was practising when we were there, and the faint sensuousness of religion reached me as I stood in this colored, glowing, well-shaped, scented place, filled with passionate sound. Poor Emma! Poor Madame Bovary! when all else was exhausted she

felt this emotion. I had not read *Madame Bovary* then, but afterwards when I read it, I recognized this sensuous ecstasy and understood that scene and its deep cynicism as I never could have done had I not touched on the experience. Arthur Merrion began to talk to me of religion after this day ; and one afternoon he asked me to come to the early mass next morning, only for once, to please him. Of course I promised to and did—walking between the wet grasses covered with light hoarfrost. For it was late autumn now ; and the brown leaves lay all down the path making so beautiful a carpet that I longed to beg the gardeners not to sweep them away.

Arthur Merrion came to meet me up the narrow path. “Ah, how glad my mother would be,” he said, “if you were to enter the true church !” I heard his words as in a dream ; my eyes were on his “morning face.” How beautiful his face was in the early light, and inspired by these ideal thoughts ! I fancied I could go into a nunnery very contentedly if at the services I could look through the bars at his half-angelic face. The whole mystery of love lies in that almost unattainable thing, the bringing together of two persons in the same state, or in states which rouse and satisfy each other. Lord Byron’s one mistake, to my mind, is when he says, “Who loves, raves—’tis youth’s frenzy”—but how could he know better, for he never obtained the priceless thing which if it be followed by bitterest disillusionment yet makes of life a splendor for the time. He never met a woman who answered to him, never loved a woman with intellect ; all he did was to distract himself among

what men in ordinary talk call "*women*," a race they cannot live without, yet curse the while. This distraction could afford no real interest to a soul like Byron's, but if he had ever met *a woman* —one real woman who could have understood him, he might have wished for immortality. For I am convinced now that the desire for immortality arises only in those spirits who desire to continue an already known and dearly-prized sensation.

And in this lies the overwhelming power of the Church for persons whose lives are not blighted by the demon thought. But I had not reached this point yet. The mere idea of indulging in religion even in the most external manner, of yielding to its seductive soul-sensations, however slightly, of testing it by the gentlest mental touches, pleased and allured me. Of course I was not so entirely foolish as not to know that this was chiefly, if not entirely, due to Arthur Merrion's presence on the scene. I did not acknowledge it to myself, of course, but I knew it in that inner recess of my mind where secrets are kept even against one's own inquiries. In a glad, soft humor I walked on by Arthur's side and entered the chapel. How sweet the early sunshine was, and how sweet the scent of the air. Ah, yes, life still was strong on me, I loved it: "Sweet was life to hear, and sweet to smell!" I was in so glad a humor I lingered outside the chapel a moment, loth to enter it. But Arthur hurried me, and I yielded to him as I would to my better self. Within was a new world, a new mood, an ecstatic atmosphere. The altar was massed

with flowers ; gray-blue clouds of incense moved softly in the air. The mingled perfumes fastened on the senses. The priest was standing at the altar, dressed in his gorgeous robes. I paid no attention to the Latin words he was murmuring. I yielded to the hitherto unknown sensations I was experiencing and sank on my knees before the altar. Arthur knelt down by my side. For a moment I felt the priest's eyes on me, and I looked at his face. It was the face of a wolf, and I recognized it even there, in that mystic haze of feeling. But he turned away again, and I forgot those hungry eyes and the outstanding cheek-bones, in the dim, warm pleasure of the moment. At last a touch from Arthur roused me, and I followed him to the door and out into the air. Why, how strange it was ! Where had I been ! This seemed to be another world, and it was with a sense of relief that brought tears to my eyes that I heard the fresh sweet voice of a blackbird calling.

“No —” I said, “—no—I could never be a *religieuse* —I am too much a part of nature.”

“That is because you are an artist,” said Arthur, looking at me with a strange light in his eyes. “But you can find faith if you will.”

“Faith ?” I answered. “How strange and how delightful it must be to be able to accept doctrines and statements without proof. That is what faith is, is it not ?”

“May I bring Father Claircy to see you to-day ?” he asked, rather timidly.

I hesitated. For once I followed what I call my

intuition—but I believe it is nothing but an outcry of the desires, speaking for themselves. “No,” I answered, shaking my head. “Not at present. I do not feel religious.”

I went my way home to breakfast in a quaint humor, playing with my own fancies. I had fed myself in my solitude on the Greek philosophers, on Darwin, on latter-day materialistic writers, and, when I needed excitement, on the mental despair of Byron, and the hopeless materialism which lurks behind Swinburne’s sonorous verse. I was accustomed to regard life as a hopeless thing, “despair was forced on me as a habit,” and I knew of no possible light : more, although I had not plunged into the hateful depths which make that conviction an essential part of the mind, yet I was convinced that there could be no possible light. It brought a smile to my lips as I sat at my solitary breakfast, to think of my playing with religion merely to please a lover. For this was really what it amounted to ; some women would have taken sensation for conviction and derived much pleasure from it ; but I could not. I have had the unhappiness all my life of a habit of calling things by their true names. Arthur had prepared a mist for me in that chapel ; but as soon as I stepped into the sunshine it fell from me and I knew it was only a mist ; the one fact left was that I loved Arthur Merrion.

He came to me early that morning ; he said he could not keep away. It seemed as if his mood had changed, he was more excited than I had ever seen him. He

committed a boyish folly and repeated some words of Father Claircy's. "He says you are too beautiful," said Arthur with eyes of rapt devotion fixed on me. I doubt whether he had ever discovered that I was beautiful. For boys feel and experience ; they do not see. And Arthur Merrion was a boy—a kind of Galahad—a creature to win a woman's heart and break it—but entirely a boy, without experience or knowledge. I was amused at Father Claircy's discrimination, and intuitively recognized a natural enemy in him. "So he is trying to prejudice Arthur against me, is he?" I thought, and laughed to myself.

CHAPTER XV.

I NEVER let Arthur see my cynicism ; not because I wished to deceive him, but because I could not hurt him, any more than I could have hurt a bird that flew to me. His eager soul, which seemed indeed to fly towards me sometimes, was both tender and convinced. We walked in the garden and talked for hours that day ; very happy, very content. Indeed it seemed to me that a new youth was springing up within me ; and when I looked in my glass after he went away I saw a much softer and more beautiful face than I had seen there for a long, long while. But there was a grave thought in my mind, which kept me sitting in my chair without moving, turning it over and contemplating it from different points of view. It was this : that clearly Arthur Merrion was in love with me. Whether he knew it or not, he was ; and he soon would know it. I did not hesitate to own to myself that I returned his feeling. That was not the point. The point was simply this—what was to be done ?

Long hours I sat and thought ! These are the hours that age a woman's heart.

There was no future for us. As for me, I must either sink below the mysterious line which separates the virtuous woman from the woman who is sneered at ; or I

must live alone with my work and my life, and care for nothing else. (I am repeating now the thoughts then in my mind ; I remember them very well, for this was the first crisis in my life when I had time to actually think out the situation instead of being forced into action instantly.) That was the future I saw before me, with no way of escape. It did for a moment present itself to my mind that though the English law did not allow me to divorce Ashton, yet, if I followed his example, it did allow him to divorce me. One glance at this mode of freedom settled the question for me ; I would prefer any martyrdom to the degradation of facing the divorce court. I put that out of my thoughts with a shudder. What was left? Nothing at all. I stared at my life, so to speak, in dismay. No opening ! None ! I had never realized this before, because I had not desired any more freedom than I possessed. But now there was Arthur's love—in my hands ! I raised my arms and let them fall again with a gesture of despair. My mind wandered back to Paul Phayre's hopeless love for me, and again came that intense longing to realize true love, that emotion which was so vivid in him that it seemed to me a part of the spirit which fled from his body. Spirit? Love! Death! Oh, what an array of words ! I looked around the great dim studio. Would Paul have left me to fight the hideous world alone if immortality were a fact? Why was he not here, at my side? Why had not his true love for me kept him with me? No—there was nothing in the shadows of the room ; he was gone, absolutely, my best friend, my true lover, gone unto that

bourne whence no traveller returns. For so it is. Since then I have dipped into the mystic places of spiritualism, where the unhappy ones go to hear of their dead. To some comes conviction that their dead still live ; and they are to be reckoned very fortunate. A differently constituted mind can only see in the phenomena something which cannot be explained, but which is yet absolutely within the realm of matter and brain-consciousness, and no proof of the immortality of the spirit. If Paul Phayre's shape had approached me then, and spoken to me with his voice, doubtless I should have believed it was his spirit that was with me. But it did not. Such visions seldom come when called for. I grew so weary with the emotions of the day and the thoughts I had endured, that at last I fell asleep in my chair. I slept soundly, and dreamed a vivid dream, in which I saw and felt myself walking in a garden of flowers with Arthur Merrion's hand in mine. I awoke with a start, still so lost in the dream that I could scarcely believe Arthur was not in the room. But the sound that startled me was only the maid bringing in lights. I rose with a weary sigh and looked out of the window into the twilight. Sad indeed I was, for my bitter thoughts came back on me with a rush. How I clung to him !—and how utterly I was separated from him. I wandered about the room wearily, for the mind distraught soon dulls the body, and I did not know what to do with myself. Presently the maid came to me with a note. Its appearance was unfamiliar to me and I took it up rather doubtfully.

“From Merrion House, Madam,” said the maid. Merrion House! Who could it be from but Arthur himself? Why should he write to me? Why was fate so quick, so hurried in its action. I held the square white envelope in my hand, afraid to open it. Of course it might be only some trifle—perhaps his mother had come home, and this was to ask me to come to lunch to-morrow. Yet, oh! how my heart sank and then leaped, and then began to beat loudly. I opened the envelope in a hurry at last, and dropped it while I held the note within up to the light and turned to look at the signature—Arthur Merrion. Yes, it was what I feared, what I hoped, what I hungered for—a love-letter. One glance told me that; and I instantly covered the paper with kisses, before I could stay to read what was written there. Women do not like confessing when their hearts are hungry and when a mere scrap of note-paper written by one particular hand is like manna from Heaven to them; but I am confessing all. I had never guessed till that minute how hungry I was. Why, I had been starving! At last I sat down and slowly read the note through.

I have not got that note; I burned that and every other he wrote me, one time which I will tell of later on, when this, the happy hour I was now living through, was one of those old hours which belong to this burden of sad sayings.

He told me that he had fallen asleep in the great dark library, and that he fancied he dreamed of me, but could not remember; that when he awoke in the

darkness there was a scent of flowers and a presence—my hand was on his, he heard me sigh and felt me by his side. It was gone—gone in an instant—but it had changed and enlightened him. He knew that he loved me—that he could never live without me. When might he come and speak? “Write to me to-night—write to me, write to me! or else come out to the wicket, where I shall wait in hope.”

I let the letter fall from my hand to the floor and sat there looking at it in a deep perplexity and pain of mind which almost drowned my sense of new happiness. What was to be done? The crisis had come. How was I to face it? At last I found that sitting there did me no good; I found no illumination. I snatched up the letter, and going to my room put a shawl round me. “Write to him,” I kept saying to myself, “is he mad to think that I can send a servant to find him leaning on that wicket gate?” This trivial thought seemed to occupy my whole mind; so it often happens in an emergency, when the brain refuses to act in the face of a terrible decision, a decision which seems too serious, to be beyond its power. My one thought was that by going out into the garden myself I might screen this sudden folly of his from observation.

I went out at the open window, which was never closed till late, for I always loved wandering in and out of the garden. So it was very easy for me, without its appearing at all unusual, to go out and cross the lawn and go down to the wicket gate. And as I came near it—I could not see in the dimness—someone

leaned over and sought for my hands and took them in his and pressed them.

Oh, how little most men know of the value of gentleness in love! the rough grasp, the fierce kiss, scorch and hurt a sensitive woman. The intensity of gentleness belongs only to those who know love as an art; but in some men it is inborn, if not perfected. Arthur Merrion's touch thrilled because of its extraordinary tenderness. His silence spoke much more than any torrent of heated words. And then one hand left mine and I felt its delicate contact with my throat and face.

"Is it possible?" he said in a whisper.

"Is what possible?" I asked.

"That you love me?"

"How can I say so? You know if I do I cannot confess it. Let this moment be enough—there must be no more."

"Ah, yes, like this. I will ask nothing more of you. But do not send me away—do not say I may not be with you—I cannot bear it—I shall die. It is all a blank where you are not. Oh, how glad I am that I have found my heart and opened it to you, and that I have this moment at least.

I drew back and tried to free myself, but then his grasp grew strong. I know I was weak, but then I loved him; so I let him draw me close again and touch my face and presently my mouth, very gently.

"I wonder," he said in a low voice, "I wonder why God made women's skins so soft."

Love is a sufficient excuse for anything and it excused

and excuses me for that folly of lingering with him. But nothing can excuse me for my terrible habit of thinking. As he spoke I thought of Waldo's cry in "The Story of an African Farm," "There is no God!" and it seemed to me so much greater than this subtlety of laying the responsibility on God of a temptation. There is little analogy between the two utterances; but just enough to cut the mind in a flash of thought—for that was all it was. I put it by instantly, for I loved Arthur Merrion, and would not allow myself to criticise him.

And now let me tell you, my reader, that everyone you meet with unmask themselves, and reveals their true character to you at one time or other; generally very often; and that it is your fault if you will not take them at their own valuation, if you will insist on idealizing them and refusing to listen to them when they speak naturally—perhaps even wishing you to know what they are. But of course you will go on idealizing, as I did then. Many and many a time did Arthur show me how absolutely he was a puppet in the hands of his God, of his religion, of his priest; but I would not see it, would not recognize it, pushed it away from me always because I loved him. "Sweet was life to hear, and sweet to smell!" Who is to resist this? None. The greatest fall before this overwhelming temptation; when there is one being in the world whose presence makes the sky blue, the sun shine, in spite of bad weather; who makes the earth fragrant and the air an intoxication. Who is to resist this, and to pause and think. Would it be possible to admire and like the one who

could resist. I say no, for they are inhuman in their actions. And they are profoundly foolish, for they sacrifice the moment (which alone we are certain of) for an ideal standard—a thing which exists only in their own minds, which they cannot show or even be sure of retaining, which gives them neither comfort nor happiness.

The wicket gate was fastened, and Arthur was leaning upon it. He put his hand now on the latch, to open it. I put my hand on his and stayed him.

“No,” I said; “I must go in. And you go home and think—or pray. You have a God; ask him what we are to do.”

“I will spend the night in the chapel,” he answered, “and ask Him all night. May I come and tell you in the morning?”

“If you get an answer, yes,” I said, and a half smile came on my lips. But I would not think against him; I wanted to think with him, to blind myself, to follow him. Oh, yes, women are all like this, even the most sensible, when they are in love for the first time. One stands as it were before a golden sea, and longs to plunge in completely, without thought, recklessly, and to forget all else.

I drew myself away from Arthur, and he gently surrendered me. I heard him sigh,—that was all. I went back through the shrubberies and crossed the lawn. The servants were shutting up the house, so I was just in time to go quietly in. I went up to my studio. No other room in the house seemed big enough for me.

I flung open the window and stood in the balcony looking up at the stars. It was one of those marvellous nights that quell the spirit and make the soul tremble and wonder ; when all the wide, dark canopy is hung with stars and the earth appears dwarfed to nothingness, and one's self—to an atom ; one's affairs—to a matter of no import. When I look upon one of these grand night-skies, it seems as if then only is one admitted for the brief hour to any consciousness of the immensity of material life. How great it is ! How helpless one stands in the face of it ! What matters the life of one woman on one planet, amid the innumerable lives that swarm on it. Oh, the breath of the dark night, and the silence of the marvellous stars, and the remoteness of the commonplace world of a few human beings whose dictum seems all-important in the common daylight ! What danger there is in such a moment for romantic natures, which are easily lifted out of the commonplace and readily recognize their own unimportance in the great vortex of existence. These moments sweep away the landmarks of the mind, fixed there by social custom.

“ In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild seabanks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.”

had no willow-wand : nor did I need it. Arthur Merrion was praying in the chapel. I could go to him. First came the wild sweet sense of utter irresponsibility caught from the immensity of the heavens, and the littleness of my own being ; what mattered I more than

the wren or the ant, so that I lived and afterwards died ? But no—I dropped my eyes and looked down upon the earth. That chapel ! Religion ! How dark it all was to me ! How dark was life itself. I seemed to be like one groping hopelessly. And, after all, those stars had no message for me ; they were so far away, too far-away ; the heavens were so great, too great. My dwarfed soul shrank back into itself, chilled. I had to live my own life ; I could not live with the stars. I must spend the night with my thoughts ; Arthur would spend his with his God ! Well, let him decide, for he had at least the illusion which gathers the immense silence of existence into a narrow mental conception, and calls it God and gives it power to answer and decree.

I went to my room and lay on my bed, and forcibly withheld myself from the vision of greatness which had fallen on me. I made myself dwell in emotion ; I recalled the thrill of Arthur's touch, its gentleness, its infinite tenderness. How happy it made me to recall it ! I had given myself up to Ashton Harcourt's passion ; how many women do the same, and think they know what love is, while they are really living like the brutes, in unconsciousness and ignorance, letting the coarse animal eat up all the finer part, the subtleties which penetrate to the marrow of the being and live like fire in the memory. Arthur Merrion's first touch upon my hand had made me love him ; instead of being scorched as by fire, a well-spring of sweet, happy waters had burst forth in my own heart. I loved. I was so happy in the consciousness, so given up to the

moment, that I lay half the night between sleeping and waking, too content to let my consciousness quite leave me, so content that I had no weariness or restlessness upon me. I was so glad that I could refuse to think, and it seemed as if I had a sweet eternity to dream in before the morn would break. I was in that ecstasy of the spirit when I could well have said :—

“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet.”

Ah, me ! this is the place where love wanders—a fragrant solitary meadow, where is no light, and the eyes meet nothing but embalmed darkness. It is well to say that sensation (which is love) can be found in daylight, with the common herd, among the ruck of men and of women. It is not so. There is every gradation, indeed ; and all gradations may be called love, or at least passion ; but those who know the mysteries of the temple know that 'tis only in embalméd darkness that love worthy of the name can dwell. Swinburne calls it a twilight. But there is an added truth in the word embalmed.

“With fresh dews embalmed the earth,”

came to my memory as I lay there half-thinking and half-feeling ; and indeed this day had to me brought fresh dews to my dead heart, dead as the earth without this moistness of the morning. At last I fell asleep, all thought gone but one, “Give me my Romeo?”—yes, that. For I was in love for the first time, enacting

the boy and girl love story of Romeo and Juliet. Like Juliet I was ready to call for Romeo from my balcony ; or to die for him gladly. So foolish, so young, so inexperienced was I ! Still, I was learning ; and it seems as if there is some object in learning, weighing, considering. Though to what end I know not, nor can guess.

But it is very sure that the story of Romeo and Juliet is only the story of boy and girl passion ; sure it is also that this must end, if not by death, by change ; sure also that there others to replace—only one or two perhaps, and those to be waited for ; and perhaps the one that comes latest may be less simply passionate, but truer, because more cynical and more subtle.

CHAPTER XVI.

WELL, the morning broke, of course. I did not say then, as I have so often said since,

“Would God the night were ended,
Would God the day were done!”

but I looked in some instinctive dismay at the broad daylight, and wondered, in a sort of dim fear, what this day would bring for me. I had suffered enough to know that love is a thing to be cherished dearly; that at any moment it may fly from its cage, let the door be not so much as ajar, but only unlatched. What had his God said to Arthur Merrion?

I arose slowly, trying to keep myself content within the embalmed darkness of the happy night; and before I was dressed I heard that Arthur Merrion was come and was waiting for me in the breakfast-room. I went down quietly, and very quietly entered the room. Truth to tell, I had hardly the courage to enter it. Arthur was standing by the window; he turned to me, and I met gleaming eyes and saw a strangely serious face. How blind Love is indeed! I could see the fanatic in Father Claircy's face, but not in Arthur's, because I loved him. He came towards me, but did not even touch my hand. I sat down and said “Speak!”

He came and sat beside me, leaning forward, and sometimes looking up into my face with those gleaming eyes.

“I spent all night in the chapel,” he said in his low, melodious voice. “Where did you spend it?”

“With the stars,” I answered. This was not quite true, but it was all the answer I could make. For just such a reason, perhaps, many a half-truth, or even a lie is told. I knew he was in a condition which could not be sympathetic with mine, and that it was useless to try and reproduce my moods to him.

“I was in prayer,” he said, “and in reverie; and nearly all night it seemed dark and hopeless, and no answer came. Perhaps it was the sin in my heart. But near the dawn it was as if my heart melted; and I knew that dishonor to you was absolute sin to me, and that it could never be. But you are pure for me, like the angels—you are a lily, a thing of whiteness, a good woman, a perfect woman—I knew I might stay beside you, touch your hand, talk with you, and do no harm—I knew it then—that I should only learn good from you and from being with you. You are not of the true religion, but you are for me as an angel. Let me worship you; I ask for nothing else.”

I made no answer, but sat looking out at the grass and the waving trees and the gray-blue sky above. Where were the stars and the soul-maddening immensity? Gone, for a narrow horizon, a garden plot, a park. Just for one moment the “I—I” of his speech jarred on my ear and struck my heart. It was *his* sin

he feared ; of me he recked nothing, but idealized me into that which he wanted. Whether I might desire more love than this—did he care? Whether I ran as much risk of public dishonor from so much association with him as he asked—as if he had asked me to take his whole love and face all the consequences—did he reckon that? No. Or if he did he silenced and forgot those voices. As I silenced and forgot those that spoke to me. For when he put his hand on mine and pressed it, I laid my other hand on his. I fell back in my chair and said nothing. The compact was made in silence.

When he left me that day I ordered the horses out for the first time since my accident and went for a long drive. Already, in the first happy hours of my love, something baleful but unacknowledged, was maddening me. Do not imagine I blame Arthur alone for the unhappy history of our love—a love perfectly innocent, according to the ideas of the world, yet baleful—happy to the last degree, yet most unhappy, too. No, do not imagine I blame him only, my reader. I blame myself even more. Indeed I think women are as a rule more to be blamed than men, in the loves, guilty or guiltless, which give life its savor. Please understand that when I say women now, I do not mean that crowd of Faustines which men mean when they use this plural ; I mean sensitive, romantic women like myself, with brain and heart both developed and at high pressure. Men suffer from quite simple emotions compared to those we suffer from ; we are so much more complex, we have so many more points of view to

regard a thing from. And our education baffles us ; we have to outlive so much of it before we understand the view men take of love and of the mere relations of the sexes. Arthur was an unusual type I think ; worse and better than most men. Worse because of his religion—better because of his refinement.

Was he better—or only more fascinating to the senses than the others ?

I turned the horses and drove home in a gloomy humor.

When I went indoors I found a letter from Svenski.

I took it up and put it down once or twice, and walked about the room, drawing off my gloves. My head was beating. At last I opened it and stood by the window to read it :—

“ I have seen you again ; it is the second time ; this is curious, and I do not see why it should be so.

“ I have tried to write to you and I cannot. Something is wanting. Oh, if I could see you in the body !—But now for this strange appearance. I saw you plainly and I said to you—‘ You are going to experience, in a little while, a radical change, affecting both your life and your opinions.’ You, naturally, seemed incredulous, but I think it will prove so. You then said ‘ Why don’t you write to me ? ’ To which I replied I should do so as soon as this change occurred. That was all that passed, though it was very strongly expressed. I presume you have no recollection of it.

“ Well, I cannot write, after all, and it would be

foolish to try, and say nothing. I am not a narrator of daily hum-drum. I am not, and have not for long, painted anything that interested me. There will be a change by-and-by, and then we shall meet.

“SVENSKI.”

I stood at the window with the letter in my hand. pondering it earnestly. What did these dreams of me—these dreams of my own—these appearances of me, mean? I could not answer the question. These things have only happened with those who loved me better than life itself—at the time when they loved me in this way. If I were not telling the truth I should not relate these things ; because I am not a spiritualist, and it is so easy to be misunderstood. If you ask me to explain them, I can but ask you to explain to me why the fire burns, why the sun shines, why we live.

“Who knows most, knows nothing.”

“You have others who love you,” said a voice at my side. “I can read in your face that the letter you hold is a love-letter.”

“From a man whom I do not love,” I answered, stepping into the room and putting the letter on the table.

“Then why let him write to you?” he asked ; and the voice had hardened. I turned quickly and looked at him.

“Surely, Arthur, you are not jealous! That is impossible.”

He paused a moment.

“You mean,” he said, “that such relations as ours give me no right to be jealous of you?”

“I mean nothing of the kind,” I said passionately. “I mean that you ought to know me better than to harbor suspicions.”

“Can I read the letter?”

“If you like—” I said—and then “No, the writer’s name is there and I have no right to let you see it.”

“The secret is safe with me,” he said gravely, and took up the letter. He read it twice and then put it down again.

“You know your name is fatally coupled with Svenski,” he said.

“There is no reason for it,” I answered. “If you do not choose to believe me, do not.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“About what?”

“About that letter.”

“I shall not answer it. I cannot be answerable for Svenski’s hallucinations.”

He came and sat down by me.

“I am suffering!” he said. “Make me believe you do not care for Svenski.”

“Make you believe it,” I exclaimed. “Why, how can you imagine such a thing?”

He dropped his head on his hands and sat there gloomily. Presently he looked up at me. His face was sweeter than I had ever seen it.

“I am trying to use myself to the idea that when you are tired of me you will go to Svenski—trying to use

myself to the bitterness of it—otherwise it may kill me.”

“And to save yourself from future pain you insult me now !” I exclaimed.

“Ah, yes—forgive me,” he said in that soft voice no woman could resist. He put his hand on mine.

“I will forget,” he murmured. “I will dream. You are an angel of light—you are a lily, pure as the snow. my lily—my worshipped lily, the flower on my altar. Oh, how I hate ever to be away from you !”

CHAPTER XVII.

I LOCKED up Svenski's letter in my writing-table when Arthur had gone.

And then—I forgot it—and really did not answer it. I suppose this was treating him very badly. I should not have thought so at the time if I had thought about it; and looking back now I cannot altogether blame myself. I have just copied the letter, and that has made me think about it; really it does not seem like a letter that necessitated a reply. It was assertive—it implied that I desired to hear from him—it did not ask me to write. If he had asked me to write I suppose I should have done so. I believe Svenski considered it heartless of me that I did not reply. This is one of the great difficulties in affairs of the heart—people are in different moods, and what seems right to one seems wrong to the other—and then each may change, and in an altered humor may view the whole matter in a new light. At all events I did not imagine Svenski expected me to write. He prophesied that when I changed we should meet.

Meantime my mind was full of other matters. Mrs. Merrion returned that same day, and sent a message to ask me if I would come to dinner. I went, and found her kinder to me than ever. What I feared was that she must see the change in Arthur—that gleam

in his eyes whenever they rested on me. But she appeared perfectly oblivious, so I concluded that this change was only visible to myself.

When I walked home it was natural that Arthur should come with me, and it happened so, without comment, Mrs. Merrion came part of the way and then, saying she was tired, turned back. Arthur and I walked alone up the narrow pathway. At the wicket-gate we paused ; until then we had been silent. One of the subtle charms of our intercourse was that we could be silent together for so long. This is only possible where people are in real sympathy—or seem to be. Yes, that *seeming* always comes in. That idea of the Indian philosopher's, that the whole of existence is a delusion, is really after all one of the most reasonable I know of. For we consider we have reached a hard fact in life when a friend has deceived us. But he only seems to have deceived us ; we might have understood long ago if we had not closed our eyes to the truth. Ah, that I could stop myself from this discursiveness which must weary you, reader, very much. But I cannot stop myself ; it is part of my nature, and I promise to show myself as much like I really am as is in any way possible.

Well, we stood at the wicket-gate, one of my hands held between Arthur's two ; held so gently yet so tenderly that I cannot think of it even now without that strange memory of past love which is half-pleasure and half-pain.

“Will you let me come in the morning, to-morrow ?” he asked.

“Why, of course,” I said.

This was my folly. He had often come in the morning when Mrs. Merrion was away. I did not discover till some days later what his question had meant. That answer meant something to him which it had not meant to me ; for he suddenly drew me towards him and kissed my mouth. It was only a moment—and then he had gone down the path, out of sight and hearing, and I stood alone by the gate, faint and sick, my heart leaping. What was before me? What had I to meet? This man was born with the knowledge of love, just as other men are born only with the knowledge of lust—or reverse the words if you will, I care not. But he had the power in touching my lips with his to make my very soul follow him as he left me. “This must never be again,” I cried out to myself “or I shall be helpless in his hands—and yet—poor wretch that I am, how can I resist it?—having tasted it once, what pleasure is there in life without it?”

I hurried indoors and went up to my studio. The large Psyche-glass which used to stand in the next room had been brought in there for me to see my difficult “movement” picture reflected. I went and stood in front of this glass. The two halves of my brain were talking to each other, and it seemed to make the conversation easier to look at the image of myself. How white I was! How dark my hair! My eyes were sunken, black, and gleamed like stars. I looked myself up and down critically. I was terribly thin ; I had none of the beauties commonly supposed to excite ad-

miration or love. But I knew, as I stood there looking on myself with this cold eye, that I possessed something greater than beauty—power, which I could put on to canvas or use upon men and women. “This is so,” I exclaimed (I, myself, talking to my other self) “and yet you are a mere babe in the hands of that boy.” I did indeed, look on myself with a cold eye, for I despised myself heartily. “You, the artist, the woman who has conquered Time and made herself Immortal, to be so played upon ! Sensation ; yes, that is it. I will think.”

I sat down and tried deliberately to face myself. But I could not. I was in sensation ; the memory of that moment interfered continually between my two selves and stopped the argument with its clamor. “Oh, God, I love him,” I could only say to myself over and over again. And then suddenly, by one of the strange transitions through which I often pass, especially when I am alone, I burst out laughing. I had remembered an apt Americanism which applied to my pious ejaculation. “Why do you call on a stranger ?” an American said one day in my hearing to a man who had exclaimed “Good God.”

The thing just fitted my over-excited humor. Why, indeed ? “There is no God,” says Waldo. Indeed, no ! One of the deep rushes of cynical unbelief came over me. How unjust the world is ! How impartial the forces that rule it, or are part of it ! That Father in Heaven, of whom Jesus spoke, makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust ! Did he not say, be better than the publicans,

and believe yourself perfect, for there is comfort in that? Oh, the subtlety of that doctrine! Oh, the weakness, the dark, terrible weakness of human nature to which it appeals! It appealed to me now, quite suddenly, right in the strong glare of my cynicism. Suppose I study their religion? Shall I see if there is anything in it? Shall I learn to be good, like Mrs. Merrion? Then I can give up what I want, perhaps, without so much suffering.

For I knew that I must stand back from Arthur, not because of virtue, but because of circumstances. He could never be anything but my friend. I resolved and determined that this should be, at all costs. And then, my mind wearied out and sickened with the mental struggle, I fell back on the thought of religion and wondered vaguely, as in a dream or dim ecstasy, whether there really was anything in goodness—whether I could be good, and happy as good people are. I knew very well that the goodness born of religion was quite different from the standard I had lived up to hitherto—an ideal standard, yet one which necessitated my facing facts straightforwardly. Religious people speak a melodious language which clothes and veils the facts of life.

The next morning, Arthur came in at the morning-room window, soon after I had come down. His eyes had a stranger look in them than I had ever seen before—a gleam, but it was not only a gleam of passion; there was another more subtle emotion mixed with it.

He stooped over me. I put him back and rose to my feet.

“Never again, Arthur,” I said in a low voice; “you must never kiss me again; remember that.”

“Why?” he said; “that kiss has lain on my lips all night and given me a happiness I have never known before.”

“You are a man,” I said, “do not compel me to take the man’s part. It is for you to stand back. Step back to where you were before last night, and all will be well.”

“No, no,” he said, in a voice of intense pain, “let me have a little time of happiness. The rest of my life is lost, given away, hopelessly sacrificed.”

I looked earnestly at him. It was the first time he had ever spoken to me like this. I resolved to keep cool if it were possible.

“Remember,” I said; “my life is already sacrificed. There can be no time of happiness for me.”

He flung himself down in a chair, in an attitude that spoke of despair, looking at me as I stood there, all the while. I knew he could not answer as a man of the world would have done; he was a *religieux* through and through. Religion was fibre of his fibre. Presently he spoke very softly.

“Cannot you come into the Church?”

“I might,” I answered, “if only to be in sympathy with you. It is necessary that you should leave me very soon. You have your life marked out for you. It is impossible for the state of things existing between us

to continue, in your new condition of feeling—and mine; for I do not pretend to make any disguise. Perhaps I can find some comfort in your religion. I will try.”

Arthur got up and moved across the room to the window as if he wanted air; then he swerved and came straight to me. He stood close to me, not really touching me, but looking at me. I turned and faced him. Then I knew the meaning, for the first time, of that wonderful line, “The sea hath bounds, but deep desire hath none.” I read it in his eyes; and all my nature answered to his.

“Please go,” I said, “remember that we are neither of us free. Will you go?”

He went without a word. And I sat down in my accustomed chair, and wondered vaguely whether my life was really to be one prolonged agony? What more was in store for me.

Mrs. Merrion came in in the afternoon, and I found it hard to talk to her. She told me I was looking ill. She asked me to dinner, but I said I felt ill, and refused to go. Ah! it goes hard to tell it—but that evening after my solitary dinner, I heard Arthur’s step on the gravel path and I went and shut the windows. And then I went to my room and lay down, and the tears came and helped me. I kept on saying to myself, “I must go away—I must stop it—I can only do it by going away—I must go.”

I tried to strengthen my resolution by telling my maid when she came in that I was feeling ill again and that I thought I would go away for a change, perhaps to

Paris ; and that she had better prepare, as I might decide to go at any moment. I felt as if I were already on the way when I had given this order, poor fool that I was. However, the order was carried out, and my trunks remained in the state of being half-packed day after day, till suddenly, after many more events had occurred, they were packed in earnest.

The next morning there was almost a repetition of the same scene, and the next, and the next. It tried me sorely ; for having made up my mind to keep my ground I did it. After these two or three mornings Arthur said no more ; but he came and talked in a vacant, distracted way about the old subjects which used to interest us ; looking at me the while with haggard eyes. His lips were drawn and white ; he was altering visibly. As for me I had not strength to go, and put an end to it. While it was just possible I must remain and enjoy. For I loved him ; and even these painful meetings were food to me, were part of the dear hour of this love, made life sweet to hear and sweet to smell. For desire is pain, let it come how it will. 'Tis the one thing certain as Death, and we have to let it come as it will. Pleasure and pain are indistinguishable to those who can suffer the extremes of either. It is sensation, that is all. It was during this awful time that I began to read *Dolores*. And at last my suffering became so intolerable that I could not work or think, or read anything but *Childe Harold* and *Dolores*. Then at last the aspiration and loftiness of *Childe Harold* hurt me, and I put the book back quickly every time my hand fell on

it—and I found comfort only in Dolores, that terrible utterance of the baffled soul, that confession that matter only, lustful or lustless, is all that we can know of. I fit for entering the true Church, when Byron's soaring had become unendurable to me ! It was then too, that I acquired the habit of laughing aloud at my thoughts when I was alone. I think I frightened the servants at first, but they got used to it.

Two hours of keen, painful, wild happiness each morning, merely because of Arthur Merrion's presence in the room ; and the rest of the day given up to despair, misery, vacancy ; sometimes the weary mind taking refuge in Dolores, sometimes roused to a sense of the folly of the situation and fastening on the idea of taking flight that very instant. This idea, when it came on me as a duty, would rouse me from my chair, and I would go to the door and think to give the order and see what train I could catch ! and then sickening indecision would take hold of me and drive me back, and it would end only in my walking about the room like a mad creature, till I had worn out the mood of action, and calmed myself to that dulness in which one waits for either pleasure or pain to come again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

QUITE unexpectedly to me something happened which made a great, terrible mark on my life. One day, in the afternoon, the front door bell rang. I was told Father Claircy asked if I would see him. A prevision of misery came to me. I trembled first like an aspen, and then suddenly grew bold as a lion.

“Show him in,” I said.

A few seconds and Father Claircy was in the room. I had mentally armed myself at all points in those seconds, except the one vital and important one; but I cannot blame myself for that, as I had no idea of the place in which he would attack me. I was like a besieged town with the chief gate open and the sentinel asleep. I tried to guess why he had come; and concluded that he wanted me and my money in the Church; intended, in fact, by degrees to make a convert. I could think of nothing else.

He looked less like a wolf than he had done that morning in the chapel.

The priest's dress harmonized so well with his face that it destroyed the effect of the chief characteristic of it, which had appeared so markedly to my artistic perceptions, amid the intensely emotional and religious

surroundings of the chapel on that wonderful morning when I had knelt there.

He came in, bowed to me, and sat down when I did; all without a word, yet with perfect ease of manner. His form was extraordinarily gaunt, but he used it with unusual grace, and thus, though a particularly ugly man, he was very pleasing to look at. The varying expressions of his face, all of which I could see were studied, were extremely interesting. I saw the expressions were masks, but I could not see underneath to the real man. His eyes fastened on me for a moment, and he took a complete survey; then he looked steadily away for some time.

“I have come,” he said, “on a most difficult and painful errand. Only its urgency excuses my coming. I must ask you, at the outset, Madam, to excuse my presence here, and to forgive it. For you may, after we have talked a little, come to regard it as an insult. But, indeed, I desire most earnestly to act as your friend and in your true interests. Please try to remember that, will you?”

“I will try,” I answered, studying his face all the while, and trying to see beneath the mask. I saw a faint smile come and go at my answer, which doubtless appeared to him naïvely cautious. But I only spoke as I felt. We were all through at such cross-purposes, as he, being full of calculation, credited me with a similar condition of mind.

“It is true,” he said, “though of course I cannot expect you to believe it, merely because I say so. But

we who live out of the world learn to look on all with charity and to try to benefit everyone. Besides, no one can look at you and know your position without feeling a desire to help you. The world is a terrible place for one so young and beautiful as you are."

I waited. What else could I do?

"You are gifted," he went on after a pause, "with attractions superior to those of most women, just such attractions as take hold of refined and sensitive natures and doom them to torment. Doubtless you are unaware of your own power, and thus you are yourself in great danger, and need some real support to take the place of husband or mother. Would that you belonged to the true Church," he concluded with a sigh. I leaned back more easily; so this was really the motive of his visit! I still said nothing. My feeling was that he was stronger than I, and that the less I said the better. For I had discerned one gleam of the true man just at the end of his speech—I had detected craftiness. I knew that I had none of this useful quality, and that therefore he was my superior in any struggle that might be coming. He looked at me now, sharply, as if puzzled at my silence, and then looked away again.

"I suppose you think this is only a preamble," he said. "I read in your countenance that you are naturally very frank, and I will be the same. Well, I have come to ask you to do a good deed."

"And what is that deed?" I said. "To enter the Church and devote my brush to painting altar-pieces

and my money to the charities of the Church? I may do it yet, when I am sufficiently miserable."

Again I did as I had done with Ashton ; spoke without calculation, and speaking my mind appeared to deliberately insult the man. He may have come as my friend—I cannot tell—but I know I spoke sneeringly and I know with that speech I made him a mortal enemy. The sneer was born of the despair and bitterness of unbelief ; but how could he know that? So little do we understand each other in this world, which seems sometimes like a mixture of Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth, and the Comedy of Errors. But the last play holds a very conspicuous part in the arrangement of affairs.

A dark flush mounted over Father Claircy's face, which he could not control, otherwise he took my words very quietly and even kindly.

"I trust you may never be driven into the fold by misery, though then you will find it your true refuge, if such a dark day should come to you. No, I am come to ask you, not for the salvation of your own soul, but to help me save another. I am sure you are generous and good enough to do this and gladly."

I waited and he did not go on ; so then I said :

"Will you please tell me what you mean, plainly? "

"Yes," he answered, still looking out at the garden. "Last evening Mrs. Merrion discovered that her son had been daily paying stolen and secret visits to you. She taxed him with it, and then the whole thing came out."

“What do you mean by the whole thing?” I asked, “I did not know Arthur Merrion’s visits to me were any secret or were stolen in any sense.”

“Did you really suppose,” he replied, with veiled sarcasm, “that Mrs. Merrion could know of his coming to you alone every morning and coming to your window every evening—whether admitted or not is not for me to say—and that she would not have interfered to prevent the scandal.”

“Scandal!” I exclaimed, and rose to my feet. He rose also.

“Yes, scandal,” he repeated, “what else could it be? But there is much worse than that. Once taxed with his folly Arthur revealed his true condition. He avowed himself your lover, absolutely infatuated with you, infatuated to such a degree that he proposes to break his betrothal, leave the Church, and disgrace his name and family for your sake. He is willing to lose his soul for your love. It is an infatuation such as only an intellectual woman like yourself could have inspired in a man so religious, so refined, as Arthur Merrion; and it is on your intellectuality and greatness that I base all my hopes.”

A whole tide of emotions swept through me as he spoke. I could not answer him at once; I had to collect my faculties and go over his words; before I could reply I sat down again and tried to think—at last I said,

“What do you want me to do?”

“There is only one way of breaking this fatal pas-

sion," he said, very low ; " it is useless to oppose him ; if he never saw you again so long as he lived he would pine for love of you. I ask you to save a fellow-creature's soul and to kill this love in his heart."

" What do you mean ? " I said, still baffled and impatient.

" It is a hard thing to ask of you, who are so noble," he said, " but cannot you make him believe he is supplanted—that his place in your heart has been taken—"

" Jesuit ! " I exclaimed, starting up. I walked to the window, careless of keeping watch on his face. I forgot everything in my horror. I wanted to see the sky, to feel the air, to assure myself the world was the same as it was half an hour ago. After a moment I turned mechanically, and faced him again. He was standing by the mantel-shelf, a strange expression on his face, one which I could not fathom, but which arrested my attention. I fancied that in that word I had touched the secret of his soul, the source of his power. He had a splendid air at the moment, almost as though he had been recognized as a king in spite of a thin disguise.

" I cannot tell Arthur Merrion a lie," I said, " I will not do it."

" Remember how much is at stake—" said Father Claircy. " His mother's happiness for all the rest of her life—think of the misery you will put her in—think of the horror of her life if this disgrace falls on her—"

" But," I interrupted, " there is no chance of this disgrace falling on her. I shall not permit it. Arthur

Merrion is not my lover, though he may love me. I myself have shown him the folly and wickedness of allowing this feeling to take hold of him."

"In appearance he is your lover," said the priest, "and denial of anything so apparently true is useless. That is a piece of worldly information which may be of use to you ; do not forget it. But, please recollect that my action is not from any worldly motive. Arthur Merrion's soul stands before an awful danger ; he would desert a bride to whom he has been betrothed by the Church—he would sacrifice her willingly, and break his vows. With you only lies the power to save him. Write him a letter—the lie, as you call it, may serve to help you with your God at the Judgment Day."

I sank into a chair and covered my face with my hands. A sudden gush of thought and recollection came over me. I had seen both Sarah Bernhardt and Modjeska in the *Dame aux Camelias*. Both had wrung tears from me in that terrible scene of the letter. But I had not understood the situation—never till now ; oh, how little people do understand of the great work of artists, even when they appreciate it. I never understood till now. My mind went all over the scene, in a flash. But was not this worse ? I was innocent, as regards Arthur ; he did not stand to me in the position Armand stood to Camille. Yet, so strangely do the lives of people of the same type repeat themselves, that here I stood face to face with the same awful situation Camille had to face. Should I be recompensed as she was, by death ? And how much harder my task was than hers ! For I was

absolutely, though the world might not believe it, what the world calls an innocent woman.

How could I do it? How destroy Arthur's faith in the white Lily he worshipped. No; a deep subtlety of selfishness woke within me and forbade the sacrifice.

I rose, and, looking straight at Father Claircy, said "I will not write that letter. I will not tell that lie."

And so saying, I left the room and went upstairs.

I shut myself in the studio and locked the door, and then I sat down on the first chair I came to, and began to suffer, or, in other words, I began to think—I was pursued by that blight of life—the demon "Thought."

Why had I done this? Why had I given this answer? Because I loved Arthur too dearly to tell him such a lie as this. When I spoke to Father Claircy I was full of contempt for Camille—or Margaret Gauthier, as I like best to call her, by Dumas' own name for her—yes, full of contempt, I thought she had done a mean and despicable thing in telling a lie, a thing which my conscience would not permit me to do. *Conscience!* A flash as of lightning had illumined my own nature and revealed me to myself. Conscience had nothing to do with it. Conscience was only a dummy in the battle, a convenient figure behind which I had sheltered. For it was I who would not tell the lie, because I could not bear that Arthur should think me a mere wanton, *like the rest*. And this was all I was—hideously *like the rest* in my selfishness, in my pride, in my self-respect. Margaret Gauthier was a great creature beside me, a noble woman, one who could sacrifice herself for the one she

loved more dearly than herself. Then I did not love Arthur more dearly than myself, as she had loved Armand? No, that was evident. For Arthur's ties were as hopeless as Armand's ; while my position was worse than Marguerite's, in that I was married. There was no hope. I could give him up, knowing there was no hope, so long as he still thought well of me. But I could not save him from degradation and suffering at the cost of my own self-respect. What was this thing, self-respect? I demanded of myself. Was it a vice or a virtue? I remembered how Ashton had compared Mrs. Herries to me, in her favor. She was a kinder, gentler, better woman in his eyes. Yet she led a life looked upon as disgraceful, and had had the effrontery to come to my wedding. Thinking her over I saw that she had no self-respect. Yet she was more lovable and kinder than I was. Were woman better when they had parted with this thing? Was it a fetish, a false god, set up in one's heart so firmly that it survived the faith in all other gods? Yes, Margaret Gauthier had acted like a noble woman in falsely representing herself in order to help her lover. But then she had no self-respect to stand in her way. She followed only the dictates of a warm, passionate, true heart, in all her conduct towards Armand. I was frightened at my own selfishness as I looked at myself.

All this time—and it was some time, for first I thought quickly, then slowly, so as to realize my thoughts and not let them escape me—I was sitting upright in my chair and looking fixedly at the carpet. Suddenly I arose, and

carrying out the odd habit I had acquired of looking at myself when I was holding these terrible conversations in my own mind, I went up to the Psyche-glass and gazed close and straight at my haggard, drawn face. There was no beauty in it then ; only the agony of a creature on the verge of a precipice.

“What is this thing self-respect ?” I again demanded of myself. “Can’t I tear it away and fling it from me ? It is an evil thing ; it makes me regard myself as better than other people, which I have no right to do. I must destroy it, and then perhaps I may discover some nobility and warmth in my heart, as Margaret did in hers. Why should I not tell a lie ? Everybody else seems to do things which I look on with horror. Have I any right to look on these things with horror ? No, because selfishness and personal pride are more criminal. What is left for poor humanity if those who love cannot die for each other ? I could readily die for Arthur, but I cannot tell him a lie of such a nature. Why ? Because I have pride in my virtue. Have I not long seen intellectually that virtue is only a word ? That it means something different in every country and among every race of people ? That to the honest thinker the distinction between vice and virtue is purely arbitrary and artificial ? What then holds me back in my action ? My own self-respect. I must tear it off me, like a snake, and fling it from me. How can I do it ? How is it possible ?

At last there came a knocking at the door, which eventually roused me, for it was continuous. I crept

slowly towards it and opened it. My maid stood there.

“Oh, Madam,” she said, “you have terrified me. I was afraid you had fainted!”

I shook my head; she did not seem much reassured, but gave her message.

“There is a lady, Madam, most anxious to see you on important business. I would not have disturbed you but that she begged me so earnestly and said it could not wait. She would not give me a card or her name, but gave me this note.”

I took the envelope and opened it. It contained only a card bearing the name, “Mrs. Herries” and underneath was written, “I implore you to see me.”

Card and envelope fell from my hands, and I stood staring at them. I was dazed, stupefied and bewildered. The maid picked them up and put them on a table. “What shall I say, Madam?” she asked.

“I will see her,” I said—then I added hastily—“Get me some water.”

My throat and mouth were dry, like wood.

CHAPTER XIX.

I WENT downstairs after a little while, passed chiefly by my maid in brushing my hair, and myself in vacantly drinking sal-volatile which she brought me unasked. I was unable to form any conjecture as to the reason of this extraordinary visit of Mrs. Herries. A week ago, perhaps two days ago, I should certainly have refused to see her, and should also certainly have regarded her coming as an insult. But now I had arrived at a state in which apparently impossible events are regarded with composure ; the mind has borne so much surprise that it looks idly on anything new. A very little while ago all the past would have risen up before me at the mere name of Mrs. Herries, and I should have turned away in pain and disgust. But the present had overpowered the past ; I found, when I tried to do it, that I could hardly remember Ashton's face—and Mrs. Herries—yes, I remembered, she was beautiful, with ruddy hair. I had thought, when first I saw her, what a model she would make. Such thoughts as these were all I was conscious of as I rose to go down to her, which will show how entirely preoccupied I was. It never occurred to me that I should not see her ; or that it would seem strange to hold such an interview.

I walked into the room, and I believe we bowed and

smiled as people generally do ; but I think it was quite mechanical on both sides. We were quite taken up with looking at each other. Of course that is very natural for two women. But the truth was that each had altered so greatly as to absorb the attention of the other. Mrs. Herries looked older than she did when I saw her before, her face had more marks on it and was less healthy ; there was a little set of small lines spreading from the outer end of each eye-slit. But she was even handsomer ; the fresh color mantled in her cheek with the same beauty, and the rich hair looked beautiful on her white forehead. She was dressed with the utmost richness, and great taste, *à la mode*. It may be imagined that entering upon this striking figure, and remembering then, by the force of her presence, that she was my husband's mistress, I was interested in looking at her. And for her, if she did gaze her fill, there is some excuse : she saw in her lover's wife, a woman whose white face was set with passion, burned with emotion, whose eyes were as the eyes of a hunted creature, who had grown thin and wan. I was dressed in white satin, made *à la Grecque*, a fashion I affected in my recluse life ; so that as we stood there we formed the sharpest contrast possible. Mrs. Herries showed, very slightly, the result of a liking for good living (surely the most harmless liking imaginable), while I looked what I was—an artist capable of working all day, and only nibbling a crust *à la Shelley*.

I feel as if I am writing in a frivolous way, just to ease my mind and heart. For there is something in

the memory of this meeting that hurts terribly. Mrs. Herries understood the world, and got the best of it ; I have spent my life trying to understand the world, and always have got the worst of it.

Well, she smiled, a very sweet smile, one that lit up her face and made it interesting at once.

“It is very good of you to see me,” she said in a well-toned voice. It suddenly struck me we were both standing. “Sit down,” I said, and sat down myself, on a chair by a table on which I could rest my arms, which were bare to the elbow. I looked idly at them and thought how white and thin they were. Was I becoming a skeleton ? It seemed so, beside this bright creature, a model worthy of Rubens.

“I have come to warn you,” she said, speaking a little nervously at first. “I could not let anyone else come, and I am sure you will forgive me for coming when you have listened to me.” She had drawn a chair close to me, and rested one perfectly-shaped, perfectly-gloved, hand upon the table. A very slender bracelet was on her wrist, with a magnificent row of diamonds set upon it. The glitter caught my eye and I looked at it. I had quantities of jewellery laid aside which I never thought of wearing, so that I had nothing on my arms and on my fingers no ring but my wedding-ring.

“I hope you will listen to me patiently,” she said, “although I have something very painful to say. I feel that it is right for me to come or I should not come.”

I passed my hand over my forehead. There was a reminiscence of Father Claircy about this commencement which bewildered me.

“Yes,” I answered. “Please go on. Do not have any hesitation.”

“Well,” she answered looking at me as she spoke, “I will take you at your word, for I am sure you are a brave woman. I know I am, or I should not be here. So we will go straight into the matter. Do you know that your husband has filed a bill for divorce against you?”

I stared at her, and at last her meaning drove into my mind.

“Divorce?” I said. “On what grounds?”

“You mean—” said Mrs. Herries, “I suppose you mean who is the co-respondent.”

My confused brain grasped her correction, after a moment, and I said “Yes, who?”

“Arthur Merrion,” she answered.

I started up in absolute horror and amazement.

“Arthur Merrion!” I exclaimed. “Oh, this must be stopped. It is false, absolutely false! What shall I do!”

“Sit down,” she said, and laid her gloved hand on my arm. I did not shrink from her touch, but I looked down at her hand, trying to understand why I did not shrink. She took her hand quickly away, seeing the glance I suppose, and misunderstanding it. A sudden quite unaccountable impulse seized me, and I held out my hand to her. She caught it in hers, and pressed it

earnestly. From that moment it seemed as if we were friends, and quite at home with each other. Strange, was it not?

“There is only one thing for you to do,” she said, “and that is to leave this country instantly. Go anywhere, but don’t stay here. You have acted in a very unworldly manner, and have expected people to judge you by your own standard. I can see that. Although I am a woman of the world I don’t judge this situation as others do, for various reasons. One is that a woman can read another woman’s face. Don’t trouble to tell me anything about the matter. The important thing is that I have to tell you that whether the accusation is true or false makes no difference ; appearances are all against you ; even facts. You are always watched ; and you have thought little of that lately.”

“Always watched !” I exclaimed.

“Yes, always, by people outside the house and by your servants. You might have expected that if you had been an ordinary woman and guarded against it. Of course when you gave up driving the spies set to work to see what you did do. They soon found out—that Arthur Merrion spent half his days here ; and there is plenty of evidence of the usual sort, quite worthless to a sensible person, but listened to by judges and juries. I mean as a fact that your servants are ready to swear against you. I hide nothing from you because you must go from England to-night or to-morrow at latest. I want you to be out of reach.”

“*You* do?”

“Oh, yes, I came here to serve myself; I do not pretend to be one of the unselfish people. My advice will serve you, too, because to go through the divorce court would kill a woman of your temperament; and it is a pity, too, that such a blow should fall undeservedly on the Merrion family, whose men have always been of the Bayard type.”

“But how can my going serve *you*?”

“I will tell you if you wish me to speak out, but it will involve my mentioning a difficult subject between us two—”

“You mean Ashton,” I said. “Do not hesitate. His name does not make me suffer now.”

“I will speak then,” she said, “and then you will understand the whole affair, which may be useful to us both. For to tell you the truth I am a little afraid of someone, though I am not prepared to say who at the moment, giving you the idea that by a Quixotic sacrifice you could render me a service, or that you might free yourself to some advantage. My own opinion is that it would only be a scandal and disgrace for you to go through the divorce court, and it would not serve either of us.”

“Speak out,” I said.

“Well,” she went on, “the fact is—I allow it’s a difficult thing to say to you—the fact is Ashton wants to marry me. Ah, I knew you would be startled. Can I do anything for you—shall I ring for your maid?”

“No, no,” I said, “I am all right. I am bewildered more than anything else. I begin to understand. If

he divorced me, he would marry you. Please go on."

"Well—" she said a little hesitatingly, "Ashton is more positive than when you knew him. Forgive me for saying that you made a vital mistake in submitting to him instead of managing him. He is like a restless horse. He has literally bolted at this idea of marrying me. It is the last thing I want. I do not want to marry him."

I looked at her in some wonder, unable to formulate any question which would help her to go on. She was looking at the table; suddenly she raised her eyes to mine, and I saw they were wet and brimming over with tears. But she was evidently used to self-control and would not even let the tears fall.

"I will try and explain to you, if you care to listen to me," she said. "Yes, I thought you would care: a great artist like you can afford to look at life differently from the every-day woman who thinks of herself only all the time. I have very often thought of you, though it may be difficult for you to believe. The fact is I am not a mere woman of the half-world, though I was pushed into it very young, and know all its ways, and understand the men of your world much better than you or any of their wives know them. I went to your wedding, because I had never been able to see you; and I was determined to see the girl who was taking from me the only man I had ever loved. When I saw you, I saw absolute innocence on your face; and I knew that within six months he would come back to me. And he did!"

“He did?—so soon?”

“Yes. Do not be surprised. We all have to face life as it is. Love has become a science, or an art, whichever you like to call it ; woman are married ignorant of this, and their husbands will not educate them for some reason which I cannot understand. They look on these virtuous, or ignorant woman, as very good, and fit to be the mothers of their children ; but distinctly uninteresting. They practically leave them soon after marriage ; Ashton left you. But you have quite different capacities from the ordinary woman, and if any chance had brought you knowledge you would have been a terrible and formidable rival for me. You would have held Ashton to the end, through everything. But chance favored me, as I thought it would, for you were so completely innocent ; and moreover you did not love Ashton. I did ; I do. But my hold over him is not what it was. God forgive me ! What women are driven to ! —Imagine my telling this to you. But I am not a fool, and I rely on your nobility. Also, I am not an adventuress, who would like to marry Ashton for security, for his name, and money and position. No, I want his love ; that is all. I want it, and I must keep it at all hazards. We have to fight for life in this world. I believe, if I were his wife now he would leave me before long.”

“What an extraordinary idea,” I said, looking earnestly at her. She made a movement of impatience.

“You are such a recluse,” she exclaimed. “You think and you work, but you do not study men and wo-

men as you should. That is why you are startled by events, and why you suffer. I am prepared for everything. Marriage is the greatest mistake possible. A life-long bond is enough in itself—the mere idea of it—to kill love very soon. With a man of the world accustomed to pleasure, it inevitably kills it. He never values what belongs to him. He is forever looking out for something which can only be got or kept with difficulty; this arouses his desires. You understand now, perhaps, why I have come to you. It would be an almost impossible thing for me to avoid a marriage with Ashton if he were free; so that I don't want him to be free. I am rich and I care nothing for the world, and I never could enter his world. All I want is his love. For all our sakes will you escape from the unhappy position you have placed yourself in?"

"Yes," I said; "I have one thing to accomplish, and then I will go."

She paused a moment and then said with an effort, "Unless you yourself should wish to be freed."

"Oh, no, no," I exclaimed. "Why should I? My life is wrecked. I do not care what name I bear, or what comes to me." For suddenly my mind had veered round to the other aspect of this affair about Arthur Merrion, and to the desperate resolution I had taken in order to break his love for me. Ah, how awful it was! Yet I saw I was right in my conclusion after that terrible argument about self-respect which I had held with myself. It was necessary to get rid of it in order to do anything worth doing. This woman had got rid of it

long ago, so completely, that she had forgotten what it meant ; but how much more honest she was, and how much more true to her own nature, than any of the good people I had known.

These thoughts passed through my mind and sustained and confirmed me in my resolution ; but the resolution itself was before my mental eyes, a picture of horror which I could not look away from. Mrs. Herries rose and came close to me.

“ You have some terrible trouble I know nothing of,” she said. “ I can see that. You ought not to have to face this world ; you are too pure by nature and too disinterested. But what can be done ? It is so hard for anyone to help any other.”

She took my hand in hers and kissed my arm—once, twice—and then was gone.

CHAPTER XX.

I WAS alone again. I had been able to speak to some one who seemed like a friend, and now I was alone again. I must think and act.

I got up and began to pace the room. I could not think. Had I indeed no friend in the world to help me? Not one to think for me? I never knew till now how alone I was.

It was night now. I heard a step on the gravel ; and in a sudden horror, went to the window, shut it and shut the shutters.

My miserable fate. Mrs. Herries could at least try to hold the man she loved, while I must hide from the man I loved.

As I stood there, suffering, every thought and every feeling pain, a new idea presented itself to my mind and brought a sense of relief. It was the idea of suicide. I was tired of my life ; I suffered more than it was possible to suffer ; I would die. Yes ; that thought was blessed and almost comforted me. Why had I not thought of it before. With this to support me, I was able to think again. I knew I must do what I had to do for Arthur's sake, before I died ; I knew I must leave the country, and go to some quiet place to commit the deed. To do it hastily would be like a confession, and

would moreover be the most cruel thing to Arthur possible. He would love me, and believe in me, and mourn for me always. Where should I go? What an awful blank was before me. Just to go out of my home and go to some strange place, and there, unknown and unfriended, blow my brains out. Here came in my weakness, and I am not ashamed of it, for it assails every man and every woman at this juncture. However great the despair of one's soul may be, it is hard to believe that there is not *one* friend left in the world to whom one might talk a little while before going on the last awful journey which must be taken quite alone. In the most desperate moment this underneath, deep-hidden clinging to humanity and to life, rises up and makes one stand like a fool before the great crisis—stand and look blindly round one for an answering hand. I had come now to the miserable condition which has been expressed only by Walt Whitman—Byron was too proud to express it, though it shows in his work, and though he knew all about “the terrible doubt of appearances.” It is a condition of abject weakness; when a great mental effort has been made, and the mind has made the final decision to destroy itself and the body which is its vehicle—then comes this cowardly, trembling longing to hold one hand that satisfies—the hand of lover or friend who is strong enough to be unselfish and to say good-bye in that grasp, and yet give love at the same moment. In that dear contact, surely the mind would rest, and cease to ask the miserable questions which instantly commence

to haunt the suicide who is capable of thought—the question of “identity beyond the grave” the doubt of “to die, to sleep.”

“To sleep : perchance to dream—” Ah, how these new thoughts came rushing over me—thoughts absolutely new in myself, yet so cruelly familiarized by these written words that leapt into my memory, and made me know that again I was entering upon a phase of human experience which has been known to suffering men and women from all time.

“Have I not one friend in all the world?” I cried aloud, starting up, maddened by my thoughts, “not one to speak to in all this mass of humanity who would understand me. Surely one—” and then came into my mind “Svenski.”

It seemed like an answer. Certainly there was no one else whom it was possible to speak to at such a moment. But he was great. He would understand me. In my last hours of life I need not be utterly alone.

I stood thinking a moment, and this thought gave me rest—the thought that there was one hand to touch, one ear to speak to, before I went out into the darkness alone. How we snatch at comfort. I walked slowly to my writing-table and, sitting down, wrote a letter. I wrote it slowly and with difficulty ; for I was so worn out.

“MY DEAR FRIEND,” I said, “for I think you are that and always have been. I have none other now ; and my life has become a burden too heavy to bear alone.

Find me some quiet spot in your country, where no one will know me or guess who I am ; and where you can come without notice or trouble to speak to me a little. I implore you do this, and write to me in Paris where I am going now. I do not want to stay there ; I am tired of everyone. I would like to travel on to Poland very quickly, as my soul is sick for want of someone to speak to.

Ever as ever,

LILY HARCOURT.

I addressed the envelope and put the two in the leaves of my blotting book. Then, my strength all gone, I fell asleep with my head on the table. From this position my maid rescued me, and succeeded in rousing me so far that I went upstairs and let her undress me, and got into bed. I was stupefied with mental suffering ; unable to think or reason ; comatose. I was just capable of recollecting what Mrs. Herries had said about my servants, the presence of my maid recalling it to me. She had always been kind and attentive ; but how could I tell what her motive might be ? I decided not to take her with me, as I had intended, but to leave her behind and travel alone. It would be a new experience—but what did that matter ? And so I fell asleep again, or at all events, into a state that was like sleep. But, when I was roused in the morning it seemed to me that I had not been asleep, but had only been lying there steadily contemplating the thought of suicide, and the fact that death was the only prospect, all through the night.

My maid brought me some tea, and the information that it was ten o'clock ; and, further, that Mrs. Merrion was waiting in the morning-room, so anxious to see me, that she was willing to wait till I should get up.

Another scene before me ; with what object? That I should break Arthur's heart and my own? Well, I had decided that. But it was evident, on reconsideration, that it was necessary to go to his mother and tell her so.

CHAPTER XXI.

So I went to tell her. She was standing looking out at the window ; and as she turned to me, I thought, with my artistic habit of observation, how like her face was to that of an angel. It was severe but very sweet ; sad, yet full of hope ; tender yet stern. Such are the faces artists choose as models for the angels who save men from hell, and carry souls they have snatched from the burning into the serenity of heaven. I stood before her silent, and awed a little by this sweetness of her face which strangely contrasted with my own sense of despair and wreckage.

“How ill you look, Mrs. Harcourt,” she said gently, approaching me and taking my hands in hers. “I fear Father Claircy’s visit annoyed you. I think he was too harsh and hurried. I have spent all night in prayer in the chapel, praying for you, praying for Arthur ; and I think my prayers have been heard. I have a strength now that cannot be all my own. I want to impart some of it to you, in order to help you to overcome the terrible situation you are placed in.”

“You are come on the same errand as Father Claircy ?” I said dully. This talk about prayers in the chapel affected me very little now. Had I not heard

Arthur talk of them. Was he any stronger than I was because of them?

“Sit down,” she said, “you do not look fit to stand. Do you not remember how once at dawn, when you were ill, you called me mother, and cried out to know why you had not a mother? Take me as one; show me your heart; let me help you.”

“In what?” I asked. “How can you help me?”

She paused and then said, “Do you love Arthur?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“You know that it is a mortal sin, being placed as you are.”

“I do not know what you mean by mortal sin,” I replied apathetically. “I know that my love for Arthur is quite natural; but that circumstances stand in the way, and therefore we must part and suffer. Father Claircy has asked me to do what to me is a really wicked thing in order to save Arthur from suffering. Well, I suppose I must do it, not because I am asked to, but because I love Arthur, and it is a pleasure to sacrifice myself for him. And yet,” I said, more to myself than to her, “it is strange that I would rather tell a lie to any man on earth than to the man I love.”

“Ah!” she cried, “you look at it so harshly. It is your being without faith or hope, your being so sceptical—being in fact an Atheist—that makes it so hard to you.”

“I am not an Atheist, Mrs. Merrion,” I said, “and you have no right to call me one. I am an absolute Agnostic, and that is all I have ever shown myself to be to

you. Religious persons are too ready to call those who ask for proof, Atheists. I am not an Atheist. I look for God everywhere, but I cannot find Him. Byron, in all his mental misery, had the happiness of being a Pantheist; I am not even that; high mountains are not to me a feeling, in that sense, any more than your Chapel. Both are sensuous pleasures. But why talk of such subjects? Let us get to the practical matter at issue."

"But, dear Mrs. Harcourt, I am so much older than you, and I want you to approach it in the right spirit. I want you to feel that you are doing a service to God and the Church in freeing Arthur from his bondage to you."

"And I," I retorted, "wish to act under no illusions, nor excuse my conduct by any phrases, religious or otherwise. I am to sacrifice my self-respect and make Arthur look on me as a faithless wanton; and in order to do this I must lose all my self-respect and either be that wanton as nearly as I can, or else tell him a lie."

"Oh, how cruelly you put it," she said. "How you misunderstand things! It is such a little thing you are asked to do! God will forgive you for it; the Church would absolve you from it; for it is for so good an end!"

"I do not want God's forgiveness," I said bitterly. "I and my conscience are alone. As for the Church and its absolution I will leave those baubles to you. Doubtless they will bring you comfort even after this conversation. Now let me tell you plainly that if circumstances were not such that the separation between

myself and Arthur is inevitable, and if I did not love so much that I wish to save him suffering, I would not do this thing for any plea you could make. All this nonsense about saving his soul that Father Claircy talked, is so much wasted breath in my ears. So far as I can understand your plan, I am to send his soul to heaven by sending mine to hell."

Her face changed and grew ashy pale. "Ah, but think" she said, "what a glorious sacrifice yours would be. The very angels would weep over it, and you would be helped to repentance and forgiven a thousand times. Oh, Mrs. Harcourt come into the true Church and find peace there. Free Arthur from his infatuation, his sinful passion for you, and then find comfort in the refuge of all noble souls, and look to our Virgin Mother for intercession—"

She said a great deal more of the same kind ; I cannot bring myself to write it down, for it made me sick then and does now. I rose to my feet with a gesture of disgust which she mistook for one of refusal, and she fell on her knees and caught my dress and held it and sobbed passionately. She was begging for her son now, and her words grew confused. But, standing there like a statue, looking down at her I heard enough of them. She accused me of having taken his love, used the practised arts of an experienced and shameless woman to snatch him from the career marked out for him ; she begged me to repent of my evil deed, for fear of being twice damned, and to give him up again and release him. The little lie I might have to tell was a mere

trifle, or nothing by the side of the great sin I had committed. I saw myself represented by her as a monster of wickedness, a wolf in sheep's clothing, in plain words, as I have said, a practiced courtesan who had deliberately taken the love of a boy and tried to ruin him. "Give him back," she entreated. "Give him back! Remember I am his mother!"

"Oh, get up from your knees," I said in horror, snatching my dress from her; "I can bear this no longer. I want to ask you a question. Rise, and calm yourself. I have heard enough. I have decided how to act."

My resolution of manner quelled her for the moment; she rose and sat down by the table, and, leaning her head on her hand, made visible efforts to calm herself. I walked about the room until she was quiet. Then I went straight up to her.

"Now," I said, "speak openly and answer me as one human being should another in the presence of that God you serve. Have **you any self-respect?**"

She drew herself slowly up, her eyes fixed on mine; her stateliness, her proud bearing returned.

"**I am one of God's servants,**" she answered. "I respect myself as being in His service. My life has been a pure and honorable one. I have done nothing to forfeit my self-respect. What do **you mean?**"

I burst out into sudden and uncontrollable laughter; nothing could have stopped this intense spasm of cynicism from sweeping over me. I seemed to myself to stand alone on a windy plain of consciousness and to see everything I had ever believed in, or clung to, blown

away. How ridiculous was this woman and her insensate arguments ! Was I mad or she ? Well, if she had self-respect the sooner I got rid of it the better, was the thought that stopped my laughter at last.

“ I beg your pardon, Mrs. Merrion, ” I said, my self-control returning after this outbreak. “ Tell me plainly what you want. I understand what Father Claircy wanted. He wished me to write a letter to Arthur, telling him I was tired of him and had taken another lover in his place. Well, I am even yet not religious enough to tell him a direct lie ; but I will force myself to leave my home at once, for his sake, and he shall lose sight of me altogether.

“ But will you really do it ? ” she said ; and I knew by her tone that my unexpected outburst of laughter had frightened her. She had no clue to its meaning and it made her distrustful of me. I felt too great contempt for her—or rather I was in too contemptuous a mood—to care to alter her opinion, even if I could have done so. I was in the condition of a person who has resolved to undergo a terrible surgical operation. The mental resolution has been taken, and is firm ; for the time being it absorbs all the power of the mind and will and leaves one oblivious of all else. I only wanted Mrs. Merrion to leave me ; and yet I hardly noticed her go.

Next to the morning-room, which I used as my sitting-room, because it was always bright and pleasant, was the great drawing-room. This was kept shuttered, and all the furniture and ornaments covered ; for I never

used it, and indeed disliked it. There was a door between the two rooms which was kept locked. The key was in the lock, and I went and turned it and opened the door. I went in and pushed the door to behind me. Ah, what a close, musty smell, what a need of air and sun. I could not bear it. I went back and set the door between the two rooms ajar. I could not return to the brightness of my morning-room, which was now more painful than the darkness of the one I was in. A large sofa, shrouded in brown holland, stood near the door. I lay down on this and looked at the streak of light. I found myself simply watching the play of light and shade. I did not think. The agony of my mind was so great that I was reduced for the moment to the condition of an idiot. So the time passed unnoticed—the time which when Mrs. Merrion left me had seemed like an eternity.

I lay here, till the gong sounded for lunch. I remembered again what Mrs. Herries had said about the servants, and thought I would try not to act more strangely than I could help, so I went into the dining-room and sat at the table, and slowly drank a glass of champagne. I put food on my plate and tried to taste it; but that was impossible. I found myself suddenly thinking. I was wondering to what depths I was about to fall. I had no idea. What was I thinking of? I asked myself suddenly, starting up from the table. I went back into the morning-room and went into the dark drawing-room, like a wounded animal, to hide myself. I seemed to have forgotten Arthur; forgotten

everything. My mind was a vacant blank. I was torpid. I lay looking at the bright streak of light from the morning-room doorway, comatose, idiotic.

Presently I heard a slight sound in the morning room. With an effort I sat up—I must disguise my mental condition in some way and be able to speak if it was a servant who had come in. For one memory began to come back—the remembrance that I must go away at once—and this came on me like a sudden stir of life—for go I must. It mattered not what else I did, but I must never see Arthur again. That one thought was all I had.

As I sat up I saw clearly into the room. It was not a servant who was there. It was Father Claircy. This startled and amazed me. He was only a moment there. I saw him put something down on my writing-table and then go quickly away. I heard his step on the gravel. What had he put on my writing-table? I slowly dragged myself up and softly approached the door. He was gone—the room quite empty. I approached the table. My letter to Svenski lay there, not yet put into the envelope. Yes, yes, this was my one hope—my one friend; I said to myself forgetting, in my despair, that he too loved me. *Loved me!* Oh, the horror of those words to me forever! I sat down, folded the letter, put it in the envelope, sealed it and rang the bell. I gave it in charge of a servant to stamp sufficiently for Poland and to post at once. Then I remembered that I had given no address in Paris, and calling the man back I wrote outside “Poste Res-

tante, Rue de Choiseul." That seemed to exhaust my last scrap of energy. I could still stand and move—I was too mentally sick to faint---and I stood at my writing table and took one shuddering look round the pleasant room. It was like the last look at the corpse of a friend. I went out at the door and closed it. I never entered that room again. I went slowly upstairs, and rang for my maid.

"I am going to Paris, to-morrow," I said, "and shall leave here by an early train—the earliest I can. You must get everything packed to-night—and you must look up the trains and the boat. I want you to see after everything, for I am not well. You will come with me to Dover, but I do not think you need come to Paris, as I am going to stay where I do not think there would be room for you."

Having got through this speech, which seemed to me a miracle of plausibility and of acting, I went into the studio, and then my brain refused to act any more.

Strange fantastic pictures passed before the eyes of my mind. I appeared to have lost my identity, to have lost all clear consciousness of myself, to be a mere observer of passing shapes and forms, most of which were utterly strange to me. Indeed, many were unintelligible. I do not know if this is a common experience to those who suffer—with me it has happened more than once when in extreme mental pain. It is a kind of agony, this chaos of mind, in which one might be dead or asleep, so completely is the knowledge of oneself gone. I suddenly struggled

from it, as from a nightmare, gasping—but I saw, plainly visualized before me, like an actual face, a relic of my nightmare—the face of a boy, beardless, blue-eyed, cruel as death, with the hardness of well-loved iniquity blotting out the beauty of his gaze. What did this mean? Who was he? I seemed familiar with him—as if I knew him—yet he was unknown. Oh! the pain of this psychic sense without knowledge!

CHAPTER XXII.

“MADAM has had no lunch and no dinner,” said a voice at my elbow, rousing me suddenly from a lethargy and a contemplation into which I had become plunged—for all Eternity as I imagined.

It was my maid with a supper-tray very delicately set forth. I discovered on the instant that I was indeed famished, and I ate and drank.

We all know how food and wine restore the body, and how the mind will come suddenly to life again under this restoration. The tray taken away, I sat up suddenly and looked straight in the glass at myself.

At that moment my maid entered with a note which I recognized instantly as from Arthur. I opened it immediately, for I was full of wonder as to why he should write. Here is his letter :—

“Good-bye, good-bye forever. When you get this I shall have left Merrion House, not to return till I bring home my bride. I came up to your house to-day ; the room was empty and I entered. I saw your letter to Svenski lying on your writing-table. Perhaps you will say I had no right to read it. I thought I had, and think so still. I am glad I read it, at all events ; for the illusion which was poisoning my soul is gone,

You amused your idle moments with me ; you are returning to him. There is nothing more to be said. I shall always pray for you. ”

There were some marks of tears on this letter when, months later, I read it again. But I know I did not shed them. I read the letter over two or three times ; and then I locked it away in a safe place. By degrees I began to understand what had happened. I had been too agitated to guess before. Mrs. Merrion had taken that letter, relying on my distress of mind preventing any discovery—or taking the chance rather—and Father Claircy had brought it back. They had shown it to Arthur and worked upon him in such a manner that he looked upon it as the letter of a woman to a lover to whom she intended to return. But what about his having come to the house himself and read the letter when I had seen Father Claircy himself restore it ? I gazed at this fact for some little time in stupefaction ; and the meaning of it broke in upon me. Of course this was a lie ; a lie to screen his mother and the priest. Was he driven to this ?—was he *intimidated* ?—that was not unlikely, for religion meant so much to him, and the priest and his mother had hitherto ruled him, as I now saw. But how could he be made to tell that lie ? Had he, like the others, no conscience ? I had idealized him !—fancied him, as Mrs. Herries had said, a Bayard. But he was not one. I saw it, certainly ; he could not have done this if he had been what I thought him. And then I reviewed my knowl-

edge of him, and remembered that he had never believed in my innocence as to Svenski—that he doubted me—in fact, he had never really known me, as I fancied, but only been led on by desire, and guided by desire. His mind had been poisoned all along by the others, and he had permitted it. He had never really faced the matter with me, nor would he have believed me if we had spoken about it in earnest. A great sigh escaped me. I was rudderless, indeed. Arthur, and the very ideal, the cherished ideal, the beloved idol, had died for me. Oh, it was horrible. Death was nothing to this—to look on his dead body would have been nothing compared to this!

My maid came in and said “Madam, it is getting very late, will you not go to bed? You will not be able to travel to-morrow if you do not rest.”

“I do not think I can sleep,” I said to her. “Get me some chloral, and then I will go to bed. There is some in the medicine-chest.”

She got it for me, and I succumbed to it easily, I was so worn out. Oh, the bliss of those hours of profound unconsciousness. Oh, the agony of waking! Well, we all know this, to a greater or lesser extent; there is no need to say more about it. I awoke to the horror of a new day. I shut my eyes again. I remembered Arthur only; and once more the idea of suicide returned with increased force. “Nothing else will relieve my pain,” I said to myself; “I cannot live now. But I must get away from here quickly.”

I sat up in bed, and was glad to see a travelling dress

put ready for me, and everything in preparation for the final touches of packing. I had some tea, and dressed, feeling less exhausted than I had expected, but more dead in mind than I had supposed any human being could be. My central thought was suicide and how to accomplish it. I would see Svenski first, and perhaps talk a little to him—he would grieve for me, and help my mind a little perhaps. There was nothing else in the future. I could never love any human creature again, for I could never trust any human creature again. I could never work any more, for the interest in my art, which had sustained me so far, seemed dead forever. I looked round my studio with weariness. I left everything as it was—my pictures on the easels—and told the house-keeper I was going on a short visit and intended to send my maid back from Dover ; that I might send for her afterwards to come to me, but was not certain. And then I got into the station carriage and drove away from my home with a sense of relief.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE were only just in time for the train. My maid went for the tickets, and I followed slowly, for I had not strength enough to hurry even if the train were that moment starting.

I was so exhausted that the mere travelling took up all my strength. I remained in this stupefied, wearied condition till I reached Paris where I had to positively rouse myself to say what hotel I would go to. I tried to remember any hotel I had not been to with Ashton ; but I could not, so I told them to take me to L'Athénée, where I had stayed once or twice when I had been to Paris with him. There was one advantage about this. I found when I got there the people of the hotel had not seen Ashton since I had been there with him, so nothing was known of my changed position ; while remembering me personally made them kind to me.

I went straight to my room and got into bed. I had something brought to me—I cannot tell what now—I know I ate nothing, but drank a glass of champagne. Afterwards I took a dose of chloral I had brought with me, and soon fell into a death-like sleep.

But of course the awakening came. It was gray dawn when I opened my eyes ; I shut them and tried to relapse into unconsciousness, but it was useless,

Everything—all that had happened, came confusedly rushing through my brain, so that I was utterly bewildered. I sat up in bed and tried to take some hold of my thoughts. But for a long while it was useless. I felt myself alone, away from the scene of action, placed like a spectator of what I had myself been enacting, and the various scenes came hurriedly before me one after the other, as if some one were passing a series of pictures before my eyes. I sank back stupefied and allowed these visions to harass me in succession, for I had indeed no power to prevent it. But at last the suffering of this contemplation became unendurable, and I rose, put on a wrapper and sitting in a chair by the window looked at the gray sky. The heavens have always had a powerful hold on my mind ; starry nights excite me, but gray morning clouds bring me down to earth and plain sad facts.

I compelled myself to review the events of the last few days steadily and without agitation. It became evident to me as I considered the awful day—only the day before yesterday, though now it seemed a thousand years ago—on which my letter to Svenski was written, that fate had taken the conduct of affairs entirely out of my hands. I candidly own that, when I say fate, I cannot explain what I mean by it ; all I know is that some force acts in human life which only now and again can we overcome ; it cannot be Divine because it is unjust. But perhaps some evolutionary force is at work in sociology and develops not only human lives, but guides the intermingling of human affairs—the combination of

certain persons in a certain way to a certain end, of which the persons are as completely unaware as are the constituents in a chemical combination. I cannot say ; none can say, for we can only theorize about such matters. If we ever do know anything it certainly cannot be till we are dead and have escaped this brain-consciousness, the limitations of which we know only too well. And who would desire to "dream," as Hamlet calls it, merely for the solution of such a weary problem as the ordering of this life ? None—those who desire immortality must certainly desire the repetition through eternity of a cherished sensation. But, sitting there alone looking at my own history, it seemed to me that a blind force, for which I was unprepared, or which was stronger than myself, had definitely interfered in my affairs. Otherwise why should my sacrifice, my own determined and heart-breaking resolve to leave Arthur, have been so unavailing, while the result I had intended to achieve had been effected by the letter to Svenski, which to my mind still appeared a perfectly innocent one ? This baffled me ; and at last I had to surrender it and bow to that mysterious blind force which interferes in human affairs. This which had happened to me I have since seen happen to others, and indeed it is almost a certainty to be counted on ; what you do intentionally is too often ineffectual ; while some mere accident, as it seems, accomplishes your aim for you. I am writing of all this coolly now, for I know I cannot reproduce the fever and anger which consumed me as I thought it out then. I did think it out, and thoroughly, but it was in

an agony of mind and body. I will simply give you my thoughts now, without considering the fever which consumed me ; for I have re-thought them many times and never altered my conclusions.

The past, my husband, Svenski, all were forgotten and swallowed up in the last agony that filled the stage of my thoughts. Arthur came to the front and occupied my mind entirely. I did not require to re-read his letter, for I could remember it, word for word. How heartless, how cold, how chilly it was ! I had been nothing more to him than a passing sensation, intense enough, no doubt, but temporary. It seemed so indeed when he was so readily made to believe such evidence against me. I looked gloomily at his figure, which filled up my mind ; there was nothing but despair to be gathered from the contemplation of it. My idol had fallen and was broken. It was impossible to think of restoring it. All was over.

There came a knock at my door, and my breakfast was brought in. I had been thinking for hours, going over and over the same ground again and again. I crept back into bed, exhausted. I drank some coffee, but ate nothing ; and then lay stupefied. For as the sun grew high in the heavens and the day became full of its usual life and activity I recognized that my place was not in the daylight now, or amid the bustle. My tired heart

“ So tired, so tired, my heart and I ! ”

and my weary head, needed darkness and quiet. I passed from phases of acute thought into phases of

dull rest all through that day. The kind landlady got anxious and came to see me ; I told her I was tired out with travelling, and that she was to keep me alive on bouillon and let me rest. I lay for days like this, realizing to the full Elizabeth Barrett Browning's perfect "My Heart and I."

"Uncheered, unkissed, my heart and I."

It was not till some days had passed uncounted, unreckoned, that I roused myself to any sense of what I was going to do. Then I remembered I was waiting for Svenski's reply to me. I gave an order at once that some one should be sent every day to the Poste Restante to inquire for a letter for me. Then I lay with wide-open eyes, trying to stop thinking the old thought, trying to fasten my mind on new ones. There were only two—that I wanted to tell Svenski my sufferings and bid him farewell—and that then I would die.

The comfort that thought gave me, that Death could be reached at any moment, that the door was at hand, as Epictetus says, for any who suffer beyond endurance to push open, was the only comfort I had.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR two or three days the answer was always the same "No letter for you, Madame." As this letter was the only possible event which I had to look for, I got nervously restless and anxious about it. It seemed at last as if there could be nothing else for me to hope or care for but receiving some kind words from Svenski, just to ease the misery of my heart. It was quite true I had nothing else to hope or care for. But my anxiety was augmented by actual fever, which was daily growing on me, and I thought of this hoped-for letter every moment—partly perhaps because this thought and hope kept more terrible ones out of my mind. What a fearful thing it is to lie still and suffer. Action is the only thing that soothes the incurable pain of the mind. But I was too wretched now even for that cure. If I had had my horses waiting at the door, and my studio close at hand neither would have tempted or interested me. I was literally stricken down.

At last one day a letter was brought to me. I looked at it, scarcely believing it had come at last. Yes—in Svenski's writing: "Madame Ashton Harcourt, Poste Restante, Rue de Choiseul, Paris." I laid it by my side on the bed and looked at it. It was almost too good to believe, that a friend had written to me; that one kind

word was for me out of the cruel world. I revelled in the luxury of the thought till at last I could bear this dalliance no longer, and seizing the letter opened it quickly and read it. Here it is. There was no date, no address ; nor any commencement to the letter. It read just as it stands here :—

“I had come to the conclusion that life here is not long or large enough to do more than one kind of thing—or even that, well—and that for the rest of my life I would attend to wife and children, and let all else go. There is peace in that—peace if not happiness—and deep thought and emotion, without which life is a vacant tumult. The naked intimacy I sought with you cannot be realized ; for the mind is not sufficient in a world of matter : unless it act by the bodily symbol, it is naught, and the symbol is impossible to you and me. I always find satisfaction in what is inevitable or irrevocable. I wanted to live with you—to be stamped in the same die with you, so that we should be as the two sides of the same coin, both saying and being the same thing by a different sign. If you had come to me when the first impulse stirred you, years ago—and it was a mutual impulse, though neither of us spoke—it would still have been too late, however sweet. Not that souls are too limited ; they are too great to unfold themselves here, in this pigeon-hole ; here one word is spoken, one thing done, and that is all ; often not even that : for this is Time, and it is nowhere else. Elsewhere there is space and freedom, and I shall wait for that.

“I broke the strands, or tried to ; I have tied them up and shall go on. The mark you made on me remains : you will recognize me by it, hereafter. I

would not hasten that day, any more than I would retard it. I do not myself know whether I truly love you ; but I shall certainly know. If you were here in the next room, I would not open the door to come to you. But, after death, we shall meet, and know whether we thought right or amiss.

“We both have made a failure of it here ; I am resolved that the failure shall not be perpetuated by trying, here, to arrange the string of it.

“Let it all go, in God’s name. There are in me, and in you, infinite depths of passion and energy ; enough to move a world or populate it. Let us keep them till they can have full exercise, not mortgage them by miserable partial efforts. This is my heart ; I tell it to you only. I care no longer for my work, because what I care for can never be expressed.

“Good-bye till we meet again, with our eyes open and our hands free. I am nearer to you, though you do not perceive it, than if we were together.”

It was unsigned. I have copied it out now, word for word, from the original letter, written in a delicate hand, in violet ink, on rough paper. Svenski is alive, and working, he will hear of my death (for I am near death while I write) and he may read this book. I hope he will, for he will perhaps see this letter differently in the light in which I now present it to him. What a letter to write to a broken-hearted woman, who had asked only for friendship—a little friendship—to a woman too, who was without faith and had no belief or hope in any hereafter. All these fanciful words of his jangled in my mind and were meaningless. The only sentence I grasped was “In God’s name let it all

go." Did he think I had claimed anything—that I had asked for his love? Oh, it was unbearable. I dropped the letter and sat up in bed, trying to steady myself under the blow. It was useless; I had borne all I could bear. I fell back unconscious. It was night when for a moment I woke again to some sort of consciousness, aware that I was talking, but unable to tell what I was talking about. A Sister of Mercy sat by my bedside and there was something tight and painful round my burning head. Mercifully, consciousness left me again immediately.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHY did they keep me alive? I have never been able to understand why I should have been saved from death or why it should have been looked upon as a mercy and a blessed miracle. I was saved from "easeful death" only to search out death in all its utmost bitterness.

When consciousness came back to me I saw bending over me a beautiful woman whom I fancied I recognized. She uttered a slight exclamation and immediately two persons (the doctor and the nurse) joined her and looked at me. They all seemed very satisfied and smiled at me. Vaguely cheered by this, I went to sleep and slept for many hours. I was much more sensible when I awoke again. The beautiful woman was still in the room, or rather she had returned, for I noticed that her dress was different. She was a most exquisite creature, a perfect Parisienne of the best type in appearance, with a superb figure, a great deal of delicate blond hair, waved to the roots, and a face which filled my slowly returning intelligence with interest. Certainly I had seen her, I knew her; but the effort to remember who she was was too great. It was a perfectly formed face, the profile Greek, delicately chiselled and colored with the softness of a flower-petal. There was no youth in it, except in the clear eyes, bright as a girl's. When I first looked at her she was sitting quietly, thinking;

and I saw that she was much older than myself, though she was free from the marks which emotion and thought had made on me. She may have been ten years older—or fifteen ;— I do not know. She looked up and met my eyes and smiled such a sweet smile—a smile that made me want to kiss her mouth. She approached me softly. “You are better,” she said.

“Who are you?” was my answer.

“Don’t you know? Madame Sandeau. Surely you remember now—my husband and his studio, and the pleasant visits you paid us when you were in Paris before?”

“Oh, yes, I remember now,” and so I did. Sandeau was a great French artist, and this beautiful creature was his wife.

“But how did you know I was here?” I asked.

“Oh,” she said with her lovely soft laugh. “That is easily explained. The hotel people got frightened when they found you were so ill, and they remembered our calling on you here ; so they sent to us. It was very sensible of them ; and we were so glad, for it was dreadful to think of your being here alone.”

The tears came into my eyes at the kind tone in which she spoke and her friendliness. I was too weak to speak again, but I could think a little. I was glad it was Sandeau who had been sent for, as I knew Sandeau had been over to London to see my picture, and had heard all the scandal there was to hear, so that there would be no mistake made—about my relations with my husband.

I will pass over my weeks of convalescence as lightly as I can. They were cheered by Madame Sandeau's frequent visits, and, when I was a little stronger, by Sandeau's. He revealed to me casually what struck me as a most remarkable fact. From an artist's point of view he looked upon my life as a most precious thing, and considered that he and his wife had been unutterably blest in being allowed to help me. Also the French artistic community was only awaiting my further recovery to accord me an ovation, and welcome me as a great worker. I looked mildly at him when he let these things fall—all as a matter of course, not to please me—and wondered within myself what it all meant. For it did not appear to me that he was talking to me about myself at all. With returning mental power I only saw more plainly how utterly I was wrecked ; and I knew that an artist can never do the fine work which makes him great without love to feed the spirit on. And Love was not.

The blank of weakness gradually passed away from my mind, and the recollection of the past returned to me. There were no stings in it now ; no bitter pangs. It all assumed an equal appearance ; it all seemed equally distant. I regarded the figures of Ashton Harcourt and Arthur Merrion as I should those of two men who stood at equal distances from me on a stage. It had all been one long, bitter lesson ; and now I had learned it to the full. I blame no one, in looking back ; I saw that all the actors in my life had acted simply according to their lights. I had no feeling of anger or

disdain. For I recognized now that there is no such thing as virtue, or right, or truth ; these things are all merely relative ; and to quote a phrase which is more often used than understood, you have to consult the map on the subject. A man is hanged in one part of the world for a deed that would bring him a decoration on the other side of the globe. Or, even on the same side of the world, if the deed is done in the right way and for political reasons, it will be paid for by decoration or a title. I recognized all this, and that there is no standard to live up to, for there is no standard but what is a mere personal support and comfort, liable to be swept away at any moment.

I had leaned, through bitter troubles, on the ideas of virtue and self-respect as part of myself. They were swept away. I had clung passionately to the idea of goodness in others. That was swept away. I knew I should never trouble to look for it again. What was left?

I probed my mind and found no hope. There are pessimists of the schools, men who have simply read pessimism and been unable to find an answer for it ; these are theoretic pessimists who produce new forms of this hopeless creed. But they all take pleasure in their own fancies ; and I have met well-known pessimists who interested me not at all, because I could see at once that wine, woman, and song had still a meaning for them ; and indeed most of them are refined and admirable epicures.

I had become a pessimist from experience ; that kind of pessimist who is indeed lost in the deep abyss of the knowledge, as a fact, that there is no hope.

Death—that became my one idea. I was a fixed and resolute suicide. With what object should I live? For even if sensation should return, it would cease; if love came, it would go; if faith came, it would be destroyed. To a true pessimist there is no more terrible thought than that of continuing life till age drives one into the barrenness of sensation.

My mind became fixed in its gloom, and nothing shook it; nothing could. All the great artists called and left their cards on me; for I would see no one but the Sandeaus, to whom I dared not show my bitterness of heart, they were so kind. I laid aside these cards, inscribed with great names which did me honor; laid them aside without interest. For, after all, what is the use of work? Does Art or Literature, or Poetry, or Music improve the world. Are we *better* for these things, or are they merely sensuous pleasure. The last is what I say; but of course I do not expect my reader to agree with me unless he too has lived with the emotions and the brain and suffered to the full. Many people are born, and go through existence, and die, and know nothing of life, or of human nature, and think nothing about the great issues which can alone give life any meaning. It is not for them that I tell my burden of sad sayings.

I read Svenski's letter again, and it roused no emotion in me. He was dead, so far as any feeling in me was concerned. No doubt, I thought, he was quite right in all he said and did, and that he was acting up to his own standard. But I could not blind my-

self to the selfishness which lay between those lines. His wife and children, and his thought for them, without which life was as a vacant tumult—where was my husband, where were my children, who should bring me peace and deep thought and emotion. Had he thought of all this, or of me, when he wrote? No, only of himself.

Well, it was pleasant to think he had consolations at the moment; and a hereafter, constructed according to his own desires and for their gratification, to look forward to. For me there was no illusion about it; I knew very well that no one can show us any light beyond the grave. The Spiritualists only play upon a mysterious force in nature and manipulate it according to their wishes.

I put Svenski's letter away, and thought no more of it, till just now when I copied it out. He had said Good-bye; there was nothing for me to do but say Good-bye. Besides, now that he had shown himself to me, I no more wished to think of him or meet him than any of the others. The whole folly was at an end. My mind at last became concentrated on one idea only—how to commit suicide, effectually, instantly, certainly, and in such a manner that it should annoy no one, nor cause any excitement. I turned this over in my mind incessantly. Eventually I decided to ask Madame Sandeau to find me a studio, which she could do easily, as she knew Paris so well. I must leave the hotel and find some quiet place. I laid out my plans all carefully, and led Madame Sandeau very innocently

to do all I wanted. She found me, in an obscure street, a house, with a large, dreary studio attached to it. This studio had three doors in it ; one into the house ; one into a dismal little garden, dank, and with some broken statues in it ; the third opening into the street, for the admission of models. The house and studio were both raised a little from the dampness of the ground, and to reach the door of either it was necessary to ascend a flight of stone steps. This seemed to shut out the whole place from the world, for the passer-by could not see into any of the windows of the house. The studio had only its sky-light. There are many such studios in Paris, but I was quite charmed to find one which suited my purpose so well. I furnished the house and engaged a couple of servants ; fitted up my studio, engaged a model and commenced a study. I was determined to die by what would appear to be an accident, and all these arrangements were necessary to my success. They gave me little trouble, as I had plenty of money, and I had Madame Sandeau, who found it amusing to help me. In a very short time I had accomplished all I could for the moment ; had left the hotel, was established in my own house, and at work for a little while every day at my easel. That I did not do much was easily accounted for by my so recent illness.

But now it was impossible for me to remain in obscurity. The Sandeaus told people that I was practically recovered, and I could not remain in absolute seclusion without appearing an ingrate or a poseuse. I

had not sufficient interest even in preserving my solitude to be very obstinate ; so when one day Madame Sandeau implored me to attend a great evening party which was to be given in her husband's immense *atelier* in the Boulevard Clichy, and I saw that I should annoy her by refusing, I yielded. For the first time the trunks which contained my evening dresses were unlocked, and I submitted to the weariness of making a toilette.

My long hair had been cut off, and now I had nothing but a loose growth of curls which not even a French hair-dresser would have attempted to arrange. I was whiter and thinner than ever ; my face and neck perfectly waxen in effect, with blue veins lying on my neck as if I had traced them there with my brush. My eyes had a most extraordinary appearance—they seemed larger than ever because I was so thin ; but the peculiarity about them was a look of inturned concentration, of absorbed abstraction. I had never troubled to look at myself till now, since my illness ; but when I was dressed I was curious to see what I looked like, and so I reviewed myself in a long glass. I wore my favorite material, the gray-white Bartolozzi satin, and with some reluctance and hesitation put on a necklace of pearls, three rows of pearls of the same tint as the satin, with a great black pearl as the pendant. I hesitated because it did not seem natural to deck myself ; but I knew the Sandeaus would be best pleased if I really made a toilette in their honor. And after all, thought I, there is no reason why a corpse should not have a good shroud !

CHAPTER XXVI.

I ARRIVED at the Sandeau's house, and was dimly pleased with the air of gaiety which pervaded the whole establishment right out on to the pavement and into the street. The house and studio were brilliantly lit ; every corner was decorated with flowers and foliage, or rich barbaric materials. I need not attempt to describe it further ; Sandeau had been busy using his genius on producing an effect for days past. The great studio was glorious ; and the brilliant crowd which thronged under the tall palms gave the life which made the whole fantastic scene superb. I enjoyed looking at it, in a faint, far-off way as if I belonged to another world. Madame Sandeau was looking exquisite in one of those marvellous aerial toilettes which these blonde, delicate women only can wear. She was a dream of beauty and fair softness. I whispered to her to let me sit idly in a shadowy corner and watch the people. She humored me a while, and then came to me and said : " I do not know what to do. All the artists want to be introduced to you. Do let me bring one or two." Of course I could not refuse, and she did. I was soon surrounded by a little crowd, and engaged in that talk peculiar to artists, and which interests no one but artists. I tried very hard to simulate the interest I used to feel in color and form and technique ; I knew my interest was a corpse, but surely I could

galvanize it and make it do. I think I succeeded, for everyone seemed pleased. But I am cynic enough to know that people are usually pleased with what they say themselves, not with what other people say ; so that I had only to be gracious and let these garrulous Frenchmen out-Herod themselves for my benefit, and of course they were content and thought me charming. For myself I was interested in scrutinizing a person whom I had discovered to be covertly scrutinizing me. His appearance attracted my attention. He was a young man, perhaps twenty or twenty-one years old. He was tall, but stooped as if from a habit of constantly leaning forward ; he was very thin, and had several nervous movements which incessantly recurred, and which had first attracted my attention to him. They gave me the idea that he was in constant pain ; but I concluded after studying his face that it was distress of mind, not body, that he suffered from. His head was a remarkable one, and I immediately thought to myself he was the very model I needed for a picture I had it in my mind to paint. It was the head of a Murillo ; but the rich swarthy cheek had paled and shrunken, and the black passionate eyes had lost their fire. The hair, thrown back and worn rather long for a man, was blue-black, streaked with occasional white hairs. The face was perfectly hairless ; the mouth had once been full and shaped like a Cupid's bow ; but it was drawn now, it had thinned and become set in strange cynical lines.

When I had an opportunity I asked Madame Sandeau who this was. "He is not an artist," I said,

She looked across at him and laughed lightly.

“What, Raphael Maurivau? An artist! No indeed. He never does anything. Three years ago Raphael was the prettiest boy in all Paris. There is nothing else to say about him.”

“Do you think he would sit for me?” I asked, with a fair simulation of interest. “That head and figure is just what I am wanting.”

“Raphael sit for you? Why, of course. He has, nothing to do.”

She crossed over and spoke to him. When she addressed him it seemed to me that he shot a glance, composed of dark suspicion and of hatred, at her. Then he rose, gloomily, and without a smile, and followed her back to me. She introduced him and left us—throwing back these words: “Remember, to sit for Madame Harcourt is a great honor.”

“Madame Sandeau does not forget that I know nothing of art,” he said. “I am absolutely ignorant on the subject, and it bores me. I was told that you were a great artist, and duly instructed to look at you well, and, if possible, to obtain an introduction. You see fortune has favored me.”

“No, not fortune; myself. I asked Madame Sandeau to bring you to me because your face interested me so much. You see I am very candid.”

He shot the same glance of suspicion at me that he had given Madame Sandeau.

“It is really not worth while to be anything else with me,” he said. After a moment he added: “The

hour has come when Madame Sandeau allows cigarettes in the studio. I am sorry to say cigars are not permitted till later on still. But do you mind my smoking a cigarette?"

I answered by a gesture.

He took out his cigarette case—hesitated—and held it towards me.

"Do you smoke?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Thank God," I heard him say under his breath as he lit his cigarette. That simple exclamation quite interested me, and I began to study him. He had thrown himself back in a large lounge, with an air of languor that was womanish (though nothing about him was effeminate) and smoked for some time in silence. I sat back, idly watching the passing crowd.

Suddenly he turned round and looked at me full. "I suppose you think I have no manners, because I do not commence to chatter at once like those men you have been talking to?"

"No, indeed," I replied. "I like a silent companion." I answered his gaze, and saw that his eyes, as well as his hair, had blue beneath the black. What a color to paint!

"I like to hear you say that," he said, "for there is really nothing worth talking about."

"Nothing," I answered simply.

"Good," he exclaimed. "I believed and hoped you would answer that. In spite of being an artist you are a fatalist, a cynic, a pessimist."

“You observe quickly,” I replied.

“Certainly ; I have devoted much of my time to studying people.”

“Your time has not been a long one,” I said.

“No,” he answered slowly, and then added, “but I have lived. There is nothing left for me to know.”

“And yet Madame Sandeau told me you did nothing.”

“Very likely,” he said ; and then I saw how he got his peculiar stoop. When anything annoyed him he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. On this occasion he threw himself back again in a moment, and, turned his eyes, which now seemed to be a different color, on me. “That,” he said, “is because what I do now is a thing she is incapable of, and therefore very naturally she does not believe it possible.”

“And what is that ?” I asked.

“Thinking.”

“Oh, that is a fatal, a disastrous occupation,” I replied, “if you intend to do anything else in the world.”

“I do not.”

“You are too young to think,” I said.

He answered in a singularly gentle tone :

“No—other men have thought, and died while mere boys, like myself.”

“But you are not going to die,” I said quickly, looking with a different kind of attention at his attenuated frame.

“Is it possible to think and then live on to old age ?”

He looked at the smoke of his cigarette as he asked this question.

"It is not possible," I replied. He turned quickly and looked full at me.

"May I make a venture?" he asked in his gentle voice. "I do not want to risk offending you."

"You cannot offend me," I said, in the emotionless tone which carries conviction.

"Then tell me," he asked, after a little pause, "if I am right. *You* have thought, and *you* know that it is not possible to think and live?"

"Certainly," I replied, in the same tone. I let my head fall back and my mind wandered away over the bitter waste of thought which was always there—sometimes I could put it back from my consciousness for a moment, but almost immediately it would return, as now—more acrid, more acrid, more intolerable than ever.

Presently I was roused by a light touch on my dress. M. Maurivau had taken my fan and was trying to attract my attention with it. He was regarding me very earnestly with those wonderful eyes of his, and he was smiling—that instantly attracted my attention. The smile reminded me a little of Madame Sandeau's; but it far surpassed hers; it was sweetness itself, and gave his face a sudden brilliant beauty.

"Don't do it now," he said in the most subtly gentle voice.

"Don't do what?" I inquired, surprised.

"Think," he answered.

“Why not?”

“Well, I am here now. We both think all the rest of the time. Don’t think when we are together.”

There was something perfectly captivating in the way he said this. I burst out laughing—and then stopped suddenly. Why, how long was it since I had been amused like this, and laughed?

“Do laugh,” said M. Maurivau, the smile fading from his own face as he spoke. “It is the best thing to do, to laugh all the time till one dies.” He threw away his cigarette end and rose with a gesture of utter weariness. He was going away, I think, without saying anything more, when his eyes fell on me, and he paused.

“May I come and see you to-morrow?” he said.

“Yes,” I answered. “Certainly. I want you to sit for me.”

“Oh, yes,” he replied indifferently. “Good-bye.”

And he disappeared in the crowd.

CHAPTER XXVII.

M. MAURIVAUX came early the next afternoon. I was in my studio, sitting on a wide, deep lounge which stood right across in front of the large fireplace. I had my table close to me and was busy with some little affairs ; I had one or two notes to write. It is sitting on that lounge, at that table, that I have written out this record. Indeed, from this moment my time seems to have been passed in this room. A whole history of feeling has been enacted here.

M. Maurivaux, seeing I was occupied, threw himself into a chair and asked if he might smoke. I said "Yes, of course," and seeing he was not in the humor for talking, went on with my work. He took no notice of me but stared before him, lit his cigarette mechanically, and then relapsed into his favorite attitude, his elbows on his knees, his back bowed, his head bent forward. Very quietly, and without attracting his attention, I left the lounge and went behind it to an easel on which I had prepared a canvas. In a very few minutes I had a slight sketch of his figure outlined. Just as I had got as much as I wanted he looked up at me.

"So you're at work," he said. "I wonder what you are going to do with me."

"I won't worry you," I answered. "Whenever you

fall into that position I will go on with this sketch if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said. "I very frequently fall into it. It's a bad habit—a bad habit, born of thinking too hard." He threw himself back—it seemed to me as if these two positions were the only endurable ones to him—and looked at me earnestly.

"May I say what I like?" he asked.

"Certainly," I answered, "just what you like."

"And you won't be offended?"

"Wait till you know me better, and you will find I am not readily offended."

"No, that's true," he said. "You don't seem to have the smaller vanities of women. I suppose that is because you are an artist."

"Very likely," I said in rather an absent manner, for by now he had relapsed into the posture I wanted and I went back to work. He was watching me in the curious, suspicious manner I had noticed him before, but he did not seem to concern himself with what I was doing. The fact was we were each at work, studying each other in different ways.

"Well," he said, with a singularly frank manner—one that always pleased and interested me, and yet I never could tell whether it was genuine or assumed—"I called you a cynic and a pessimist last night and you did not seem to resent it."

"Certainly not," I replied. "I am both."

"I should like to know if I'm right about something else I see in you. May I ask?"

“Of course.”

“Have you not decided upon suicide?” I looked at him quickly; he smiled that fascinating, marvellous smile of his. I put down my brushes and, coming round the lounge, sat down near him.

“What made you think that?” I asked.

“Oh, I cannot explain. But I’m right, am I not?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what drew me to you. It’s a point of sympathy.”

“Why, have you the same idea?”

“Of course!” he exclaimed vehemently. “Didn’t I tell you that it is impossible to think and live.” He rose restlessly, to throw his cigarette end on the hearth, and lit another. As he did so I noticed a curious ring on his finger. It was the most slender thread of silver twisted round and round the finger, like a snake’s body, and with an exquisitely finished serpent’s head and tail.

“That is a curious ring,” I said. “It interests me. May I look at it?”

“I can’t take it off,” he said holding his hand out to me—a brown hand, but so exquisitely formed!—“I never have, since I first put it on.”

“Are these rings a fashion now?” I asked. “For I remember noticing one on Madame Sandeau’s hand, and it interested me like this does, for it fitted in with a fancy of mine. Can I buy one?”

“No,” he said roughly; and he drew his hand back.

“They are not the fashion. Mine was made for me.”

“Well, I suppose I can have one made if I have a

pattern. I will ask Madame Sandeau to lend me hers."

"I don't think she will," he said with a laugh.
"What's your interest in the ring?"

"I am interested in serpents," I said. "And I would like a ring like that to wear. Shall I tell you in what character I want to paint you?"

"Yes," he said; with no interest, however.

"As a serpent-tamer, surrounded by them."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed! "you're an extraordinary woman. Whatever made you think of that? I've lived among serpents, but they got the better of me."

"Perhaps they will in the picture."

"You have an object in painting this picture?"

"Yes—it is the last one I shall ever paint."

"There is a meaning in it?"

"Yes—of course."

He was roused to some kind of interest himself now, and stood watching me with a curious, covert look that I frequently noticed in him; not the glance of keen suspicion, but the look of habitual doubt. Suddenly this cleared off his face, and his eyes assumed the wide-open, straightforward gaze which made them sometimes so charming.

"You have lived," he said, "and your heart has been broken by men."

"Yes," I said, "that is true."

"Well, I have lived, and intensely; I have lived everything out, till I am a mere corpse. And my heart has been broken by women."

"I can believe it," I said. "Human nature is bad

all through, and there seems to be a war between the sexes always going on, as if two nations which hated each other were closely intermixed. It seems, from what one reads, to have always been so ; and I suppose it always will be. There is nothing to live for. But you—you are so young—you will recover.”

“Young !” and he laughed—a laugh that made me shudder. “Yes, I must seem a boy to you ; but I am an old man. He that has known a Faustine never again knows youth. Curse all women—yes—all—don’t look at me with those clear eyes. It was a crime for women to be created. You make me want to kiss that mouth of yours, so innocent in spite of the misery on it. What is the use? None. Curse you.”

He snatched up his hat, crossed to the studio door, went out, and I listened to him descending the stone steps and ascending the stony street. I sat and thought of him ; and knew his misery to be as deep and hopeless as my own.

The next day he came earlier. He entered by the studio door and found me at work, filling in my sketch.

“Is it permitted to come and go in this unceremonious manner ?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” I said lightly, “the models always do.”

“Come and sit down here and talk a little while,” he said, sitting down on the lounge. When he asked things like this there was something so pleading in his manner that I never stayed to think, but did what he wanted, as I should for a child that begged a favor of me. I put down my brushes and went and sat beside him.

“What is it ?” I asked.

“Oh, I can’t tell yet. I’ve no power to decide what I’ll say, I depend on your mood and on mine. But there are things I want to say. I may smoke ?”

“Don’t ask me any more,” I said, “You always can.”

“Well,” he said morosely, “when I meet with a lady and a good woman I like to treat her as one.”

I laughed bitterly at the idea his words suggested.

“I am not generally considered a good woman.”

“I know that,” he said, still speaking in the same morose tone ; “it was that which interested me in you first. I should never have troubled my head to look at a great artist or a beautiful woman. But I heard you were the most vicious woman that ever lived ; your reputation is quite awful. I thought the combination might be something new. Well, I have found something new, but not what I expected. It just shows what fools men and women are. They don’t *know* anything—that’s what I complain of—they don’t *think*. As for *women*—faugh !—oh, don’t mistake me—*you’re* not one of them. I was using the word in the ordinary sense. You are a good woman, as I said, and such beings are rare. Won’t you put your hand in mine ? We’re both dead, it won’t make any difference, you know.”

“Oh, no,” I replied, “it won’t make any difference,” and I put my hand in his.

“Ah, that’s nice,” he said, and leaning back he went on smoking and relapsed into a reverie.

As for me I, too, was busy thinking. What a strange companion I had chanced on ; and yet how completely I was at home with him—more so than with anyone else I had ever known. His fantastic changes of mood, his way of ignoring all trifling subjects of conversation, and talking only of what he really felt, suited and pleased me. A kind of dim content stole over me as I sat there.

“When he whom I love travels with me, or sits a long while holding me by the hand,
I walk or sit indifferent—I am satisfied—”

What possessed me to think of those lines? Was I mad? They recalled the past. I attempted to get up. But Raphael held my hand closer with a pressure exhibiting no strength, but a subtlety of touch which was far more irresistible than strength, “Don’t go yet—don’t spoil this moment !” he said.

He turned his head towards me, supporting it on the back of the couch.

“Will you let me kiss you ?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“No,” I answered, “it is foolish.”

He turned his head away and went on smoking. Presently he started up suddenly and spoke in the wildest manner :

“I believe you could save my soul !” he exclaimed, “if it were not sold—if it were not sold ! Oh, why didn’t we meet before ? If there is a Creator, curse him !”

And so saying he went away. After sitting a long time, thinking about him, I went back to my easel and tried to touch in something of the strange look in his face which I desired for my serpent-tamer.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE next day he really gave me a sitting. He came in morose, dropped into the right chair, and began to smoke steadily, in the attitude I wanted. I painted away steadily, without even exchanging a word with him. I did a splendid hour's work and then, tired, put down my brushes. Then he rose and sat on the lounge. "Come and talk," he said.

I came and sat beside him, glad to rest.

"This sitting business is very good for me," he said "for I can come without apology. And once having seen you I couldn't help hanging round you half the day."

Nothing came into my mind to say, so I sat silent.

Presently he turned his head and looked at me.

"I need not stand on ceremony with you," he said. "You are not quite like the rest. I want to tell you something. I was awake all night, thinking of it. I am in love with you. I get worse every time I see you; I get worse still when I am away from you—then I think I must go mad. Do let me be here all the time I can. I swear to you I am frightened when I am away."

"Why are you frightened?" I asked.

"My God, I cannot tell you, and you cannot guess. But you will, I think. Don't you see I am a wreck, a

dead thing that should never touch a woman's lips, for I am a man no longer—only a dead thing.”

He turned my head towards him and kissed me. When his lips first touched mine I felt the hot tears fall on my cheeks. But they dried, and no more came. Suddenly he broke from me, started up and cried out wildly :

“I am not fit to live !—I should be in the grave now—God ! What folly it is ! No outcome to it—no hope—no future. Curse women ! Why did you awaken my dead self like this !”

And flinging himself back on the lounge the tears came again, and he buried his face in his hands. In a moment or two he roused himself.

“Crying like a woman !” he muttered, “this is what I am come to. Better be dead and have done.” He sat quite still for a little while, and then sought my hand and held it. Presently he began to speak in a very gentle tone.

“Why was I to meet you? Why couldn't I go to the grave with but one idea of a woman and that Faustine? It is bitter, it is hard.”

“Why should you go to the grave yet?” I asked. “There is a great deal left for you.”

“No ! There is nothing ! And besides I am bound—fettered !—you don't know—you can't imagine. I wonder if I will try to tell you something ?”

“Yes,” I said. “It is better sometimes to speak.”

“Let me smoke a cigar then.” He lit it, and still holding my hand went on speaking with pauses here and there.

“I have a great desire I have a longing, greater than any other feeling, and yet I have not the complete courage I want death—life has become intolerable—a horror—undesirable—but I cannot go through the deed utterly alone I am afraid—there is no other word for it—oh, if I only *knew* it meant annihilation! But one knows nothing Well, I cling to the old idea of association strengthening resolution.

“What I need above everything in the world now is a friend who would understand my object! a kind friend, a true friend, a good woman. I have a devil already, to stand by me—a man worse than myself—but he makes it the harder. I have sworn with him that I will not hesitate when a certain moment comes. Men who are dead should not walk the earth too long, we are agreed on that. But he is younger than I am—I go first.

He came and sat down close to me and put his hand on my arm. “Listen,” he said. “I have but a year to live; and I love you. I shall be a coward. Had I not better shoot myself to-night?”

“Oh, no, no!” I exclaimed.

We sat there, in the twilight, motionless, paralyzed by thought, and wonder, and fear.

“Will it be eternity or annihilation?” I said aloud without knowing it.

“Ah?” he cried out as if in pain. “Why ask these foolish questions! You know there is no answer. And I want to live! I love you and I want to live! Here—or there—what does it matter? But there is no hope—nothing—here or there! Without continuity of sen-

sation, how can immortality exist? The brain is destroyed by death—it is all over—continuity is destroyed. Better end it—end it at once, so as not to see the horror of it any more. Oh, why do you give me this feeling again—this longing—this loving? It is always the same, with no satisfaction—only pain—only hunger! Why should I live through this terrible year? Why?”

“Yes, live this year,” I said; and then added, wonderingly, “what brought you to me?”

“As long as you live the miserable and the desperate will come to you. The others will never understand you. May the rest be spared the torture of loving you.”

“There will be no risk of that,” I said, “for my departure from this stage is close at hand. I will be what I can to you and then go quietly out, like a candle blown by the wind. Who is the devil you talk of? Is he your friend?”

“My friend!—Yes, indeed; that devil incarnate, Alexandre Aurigot! He is capable of nothing but evil. He is younger than I am; but his soul is gone—gone utterly—there is only a cynical intellect and a heartless body left.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE next day Raphael brought Alexandre Aurigot with him. Madame Sandeau had come in the previous evening for a little while and I asked her who he was.

“Raphael’s great friend ! People say he has ruined Raphael, he is so wicked. He has attracted notice already as a surgeon, and the great doctors say he will be extraordinary. For the rest he is a profligate, as complete a roué as his years permit. Blasé and cynical, that’s the worst of it. I do not like people who talk as he does, and as Raphael does now.”

Her beautiful hands were lying in her lap and I looked at the serpent ring.

“Lean back and take a moment’s rest, Faustine,” the words came into my mind, and I looked at her lovely fair face with its dimples.

“You don’t like M. Maurivau,” I said.

“Why, yes,” she exclaimed. “Of course I do. He is a great friend of mind, and I wish him every good imaginable. But I wish he would not blaspheme and talk the cynical nonsense he does now ; it is nonsense, and disagreeable. It annoys me.

I was thinking of this little conversation when M. Aurigot came in with Raphael. He was evidently younger, but looked older ; the intense cynicism and

the bitter hardness that sometimes came on Raphael's face was fixed upon his. He was clearly just as Raphael had described him ; soulless. This made him an unredeemable profligate, a relentless creature in pursuit of any aim, cruel without knowing it, implacable as a natural force.

All this I saw and thought of, while he spoke. But when first he leaned back in silence and let Raphael talk, I was chilled suddenly by a new horror which filled my mind, so that I heard no word that was said, for many minutes. I saw before me the face of my terrible dream at the Court—that beardless, boyish face filled with cruelty—the face I seemed then in my dream, to recognize as familiar, but which I well knew now I saw for the first time. This man was in my fate—would surely bring my death ! What did these strange things mean ? Why had I dreamed of Ashton Harcourt (though I did not love him) and he of me ? It was inevitable ; the future was fixed ; it was only a flash of prevision. Oh, kismet ! kismet ! what art thou ? And what is life, thy toy—and man, a lesser thing still, simply the pawns in the game thou playest ! All this frenzy of thought swept through me as I sat and gazed at this face, so well known, so unknown !

Presently I roused myself, by a great effort. I compelled myself to speak and to make Aurigot talk. Was he, as Raphael said, a devil ?

I did not dislike him ; he rather interested me. We had a long conversation, Raphael sitting by and smoking in silence. We had a strange conversation about

life and death—those words best describe the range of the subjects we spoke of. He showed me a black chasm which stood in the place of his mind—some terrible fire had raged there. His indifferentism was something amazing, even to me. I retained a lingering emotionalism which made me still able to love and suffer ; so did Raphael, and that was why he clung to me. Aurigot's dark soul, lit by intellectual flashes from time to time, as by white electric light was a thing he could never escape from, which kept him forcibly to his bitterest mood ; but it galled and cut him, I could see. And I knew it would gall and cut me, too ; but I was prepared for it. I was glad of it. There comes a time when we welcome the surgeon's knife.

I cannot express the rest, the deep mental rest, which I gained in my conversations with these two. I no longer felt alone in the world. I no longer felt as though I had a dreadful secret to carry about with me. Now I could openly speak of the pessimism which was wearing out my heart, of my sick weariness of life, of my longing for death and silence. To these men the ideas were familiar, from experience. To Aurigot, especially, his own mind was horror enough without any other. He had thought himself outside of all hope, all illusion, all possibility of finding comfort in faith or belief or even in "withholding judgment." He was not a philosopher, with a balanced mind ; he was a rebel against life and nature, seeing no possibility but the blackest.

One day I asked him at what age he and Raphael had decided to die. He told me, and I said quietly that I

should die at the same age. "I am glad to have an hour fixed in which to depart," I added. "There is no object in haste or in delay. Now the time is settled when the door shall open for me into the darkness."

Raphael was there, and had listened in silence. They went away together, but presently Raphael returned. He fixed a strange look on me. "I can't judge a woman's age," he said. "Alexandre says you have not a year to live. Is that true?"

"I have only six months," I answered, looking steadily at him. It seemed to me too long! He flung himself down on the couch at my side; he took my hands and wetted them with his tears; he drew me to him and kissed me, while I, for the first time, it seemed to me, could meet his kisses with the same wild tenderness which prompted them.

He caressed me—true caresses—not those of mere desire—and fondled me till the mingling of love and despair had worn him out, and he lay, like one dead, his head in my lap, but his hands holding mine in a tender, nervous grasp.

"Don't send me away," he murmured. "Don't ever send me away. Let me love you till the end. Oh, why did we not meet sooner?"

As for me, my heart was bursting, and I could not speak. The hunger in me had leaped into life—I had found the love Paul Phayre had made me wish to find—now, too late, too late, for Love and Death came together. Death irrevocable, not in the shape of

any vow or pledge, but living death in ourselves.

“You will let me be with you till the end?” he said again.

“Yes ; why should we separate ! It is suffering, but it is better to suffer together than alone.”

“Yes, for poor fools such as we are, with unintelligible feelings, and hungers of the soul ! How I envy Alexandre.” Suddenly he rose up and sat beside me ; and taking my face between his two hands looked earnestly at me. Then he spoke, very softly and gently.

“You are a marvellous woman, to let me love you, you who might have all Paris at your feet and a hundred robust lovers. Ah, my dear one—”

“Don’t call me that,” I said, a sudden shuddering coming over me. “Don’t call me any name like that—”

“I will not ever—” he said trying to soothe me.

“Promise me, promise me,” I exclaimed, “that you will never call me sweetheart or darling—”

“No indeed,” he said, starting up with a gesture of disgust. “Those are names one uses for cocottes—for Faustines—Ah ! hateful names—”

He stopped himself and came back to me and again took my face in his hands.

“Forget all this,” he said ;—“try to, and I will try to—these memories of the past, I mean. Tell me, do you love me ?”

My heart seemed to swell so that I could not bear it. I did not know what love is. Surely this was it !

“I think so,” I answered.

He took his hands away and sat gloomily beside me.

“Yes,” he said sadly, “’tis so hard to know love, to be sure that it is love !”

We said no more that night. No later protest could repair my doubtful answer, I well knew. And he fell into a mood of sadness too deep to be chased away. He left me with only a pressure of the hand. My heart ached more for him than for myself. Was that love? I wish I knew, even now. Yet how he has made me quiver with the lightest touch, how the mere thought of him has thrilled my whole being a thousand times a day ! Is that love? I wish I knew.

And thus I entered on

“The last hour shod with fire from hell.”

I remained in my studio, in my house, working or idling, as the humor took me. I no longer observed the weather or the seasons, or whether people were in Paris or in the country. Why should I? I had no interest in these things. A war between Russia and England would hardly have roused me. I had reached a strange condition ! one that seemed like Death itself—and yet I was so happy ! There was no future—nothing but the moment I had—the hour I lived in ! Ah, that was dear, and, more, it was desirable. Nothing would have bribed me to part with it so long as Raphael desired it too. His companionship and his love were both as often keen pain as keen pleasure ; and it is hard indeed to distinguish between these two. For a nature like mine this keenness means living. I knew it could not last ; I knew that Raphael would kill himself when his

time came ; that there was nothing but to drink the fullness of the moment. It was full to me ; though Raphael never understood altogether how I could find it so. He had lived among women who demanded so much more of him ; and he had never before found one who cared for his companionship, his thoughts. One night he said to me : “ The women I have lived among have been such brutes ! My God ! Look here ! Look where one of them shot me. She tried her best to kill me. She was like a wild animal. And you—even you—would either be tired or jealous if we had years before us instead of months.”

“ Perhaps,” I answered. For I knew he was right : I knew that change is the one immutable law.

He was with me as much as he liked ; and that meant all the time. I was quite indifferent now as to what people said or thought. Everything that could be had already been said and thought. A definite and abominably scandalous story about myself and Arthur Merrion had followed me to Paris ; and doubtless had followed him to the chateau in the south of France where he was wooing his bride ; and doubtless he would be made to suffer severely in the orthodox Catholic circle in which he was. How could this be helped ? Is it any use to be innocent ? None. I recognized the uselessness of all efforts to right oneself with the world. The one gain which really had come to me from the fire I had been through was that I had reached a mental altitude in which I no longer saw in myself anything to respect. I understood that neither one’s own standard nor that of

the world really amounts to anything. I felt them to be purely arbitrary.

Before that change Raphael's unconscious revealing of his familiarity with the blackest side of life would have offended me; his treatment of me would often have hurt me. Now these things roused in me no feeling as regards myself, for I looked on myself as nothing. Circumstances might have made me as depraved as any of the creatures whose memory inspired him with horror; I might perhaps have struggled on with a soul already in hell, as Raphael himself had done. It is very good to know these truths, to know that virtue is not and that people are placed in the world just as leaves grow out on a tree. Each leaf has a different place, but no place is better than another. There are virtuous women who look down upon Faustines because they are not virtuous; there are many Faustines who look down upon virtuous women merely because they are not beautifully dressed. The demi-mondaine usually has a mind which has never appreciated the idea of virtue, and has been thoroughly trained in the cult of dress; while chaste women who understand dress are quite rare. Does it make any difference in the end? Is either really superior to the other after all? No; for the grave is always close at hand, where all differences are smoothed away and nothing remains.

It is the fearful conviction that we really have nothing but annihilation to hope for that makes life unbearable. Once recognize that nothing else can be proved and then all content is at an end. One night Raphael

cried out in a sort of horror: "Would God I knew there is a hell, and that I should go to it!"

For sensation is the one thing we desire, and the continuity of sensation the one thing we can bear to look forward to. Raphael, already in hell, preferred to remain there through eternity rather than be blown out like a candle. And he longed for death because the constant facing of the thought of coming annihilation was unbearable. He clung to me because he had this wild, fickle, desperate passion for me; he could sometimes forget the horror of his mind when with me and when our association swept thought away.

What strange hours of love we passed together—broken in upon by some fierce spasm of despair when one or the other would quail before the sudden recollection of the truth and cry out to the unhearing Gods! What tears would come, what sad and silent partings would take place!

One day he came in and sat down and began to smoke at once, as, indeed, he generally did. He leaned forward, and his coat was buttoned over the light waistcoat he wore. I was gay, and the figure seemed too unhappy; I wanted to change his mood, since I did not want it just then for my canvas. I came to him and lightly opened his coat and threw it back. He started in horror and alarm. "Ah!" he cried out, wildly, "what are you going to do? Leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

Shocked and startled by his manner, I stepped back and sat down in a chair at some distance. His old dark, suspicious look had come back, though we knew each other so well. There was a silence, for neither knew what to say ; and the tears came to my eyes. I had such a little time left ! It would be terrible to make him hate me, and have no companion at the last. I said something like this, with the distress of a child, and said I did not know what I had done. Presently he came to me and took my hand in his.

“Forget it,” he said. “But remember that I cannot always forget. You are the only good woman I have ever known except my mother and sister ; and they are nothing to a man—why, I know not. You might have saved me—we might have made life possible—if we had met earlier, before the decay and corruption of the heart and mind had set in.”

I was so timid with him after that, fearing by some inadvertence to rouse these terrible suspicions in him that at last he spoke of it.

“I don’t pretend to understand you,” he said, “for you are a marvellous woman. But never think again that I confuse you with the crowd. It is only my own wounds that show themselves sometimes, and which startle you.”

There were not many events during these strange, happy, despairing months, which, as I look back on them, seem as if they were the only part of my life worth living—a delirium of keen sensation. I wrote the first chapter of this history before I had met

Raphael. I see that I said there I had never loved any man. I have already said that I do not know if I loved Raphael. I do know this, that I could not live without him. And that very fact made me a more resolute suicide than ever, though my life with Raphael had actually brought back a strange youth and beauty to my face! I dared not allow myself to think of his leaving me—or of his death.

I re-furnished the drawing-room in my house, to please a fancy of Raphael's. I did anything he liked of this sort, giving a kind of sad, reckless gaiety to our phantasmal honeymoon. I made it into an absolute Turkish interior; and it was a rest to go there from the studio, the rooms being so entirely different. Here in the evenings I sometimes received visitors; the Sandeaus, and one or two artists who were more sympathetic or more determined to know me than the others; for nothing would induce me to go out. I never troubled to consider what they might say of Raphael's constant presence; I let them say what they liked. I was there always, sufficiently gracious; looking, as I well knew, more beautiful than I ever looked in my life, and always perfectly dressed. I had a strong feeling that I should die better if I kept my full beauty to the end. Raphael often asked me if I cared what comments should be made on his presence, whether it would be easier for me if he should keep away in the evenings. I had always the one complete answer for him:

“Does anything matter?”

My picture was an object of much interest, and one

or two eminent artists begged to visit it several times. I painted Raphael as I knew him, and I saw that I had put something into the face and figure which arrested attention and was not readily criticised.

To return to the drawing-room—the rest of this history, very short now, is enacted in these two rooms—one evening when Raphael and I were sitting talking aimlessly yet contentedly, Madame Sandeau came in, bringing with her a beautiful girl of about sixteen, with an olive complexion, great black eyes and a quantity of long black hair. Madame Sandeau introduced her to us as her niece. Raphael relapsed into a fit of steady smoking; the only sociable effort he made was practically an insult. He offered Madame Sandeau a cigar. She shot a furious glance at him and very soon went away.

“Will you tell me,” I said, “why you drive people away like that?”

“Will you tell me,” he retorted, “why she should lie when I am here who know all about her? Neither she nor Sandeau have any nieces.”

Madame Sandeau very seldom came after that. I did not regret it. We were more alone together; and that was the only pleasure left to either of us.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE last hour is here.

Sitting in my dreary, dim studio, I have written all the truth ; I have told all that it is possible to tell of my days and hours and ways and words of love. Surely the burden of sad sayings should be very near its end, and so it is. There are only a few days more. The gloom is awful. Raphael is hardly ever with me now. He has begun to drink and drown himself in that miserable forgetfulness ; I do not blame him ; I do not wish he were here. Though the gloom is awful, I can bear it. I have borne so much I can bear anything. I have had the comfort of his society so near the end that surely I can face that end alone? Surely !

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Yesterday Aurigot came in alone.

“Where is Raphael?” he said.

“I do not know,” I answered.

“Do you expect him?” he said, fixing his relentless eyes on me. I knew very well what he meant. Was I left alone to face the end—that was his query.

“I do not,” I answered shortly ! And he went away.

Do not suppose he showed gentleness, sympathy, consideration in asking me this question. I knew well that if Raphael failed to see the deed done, Aurigot would

be there. He believed in death ; he was a suicide-maniac. It was his one faith. He would let no friend of his fail !

The hours go by. I am alone, with my thoughts, which start up one by one, like figures, and suddenly face me. I look quietly around at them now : life is over ; I am like a piece of driftwood, washed away, lost, left.

On the night of the day I was writing before, Raphael came back to me. He was in a terrible state ; no wine could cloud his mind—he was almost mad. Every moment since then he has been close to me. I soothed and calmed him ; and at last the tears came to him and he wept over me—and himself—and the whole misery—like a child. Then came a day of gloom and silence, when we clung together like two beings left alone to face shipwreck. Hours of mingled pain and pleasure glided by like mocking ghosts, leaving us mute with despair. It was well—for the moment there was forgetfulness—oblivion. If the pain of knowledge and recollection came back more keenly afterwards—what matter. And so we clung together till to-day—till this evening—for I am in the actual last hour—soon I must do the deed. When the clock strikes twelve—but there is a little time, and I have yet something to tell my reader.

It was only a little while ago that Raphael went away. He never released me from his grasp all this evening. He clung to me as though the last hour had come. We seemed to feel that it must end, it must

go ! But oh, how we clung to it, we that were born with feeling. I never knew how Raphael loved me till to-night ; I never knew how much I cared for him, much though I thought it was. To be blown out like a candle and leave him ? Yes, it was best ; I knew it all the while ; for this must end. Better die myself than see love die. Oh, the bitterness of that knowledge, always, that it is only for a little while—that change must come, must come—that there is naught else ; to know the grave ends all—to know 'tis happiest to take arms against the sea of troubles and by opposing end them ! We have not been speaking ; but I know Raphael too has been haunted by thought, even when he seemed most oblivious. We could but press each other and so find dim comfort.

Here on this lounge he was by my side, such a little while ago. He had not spoken for hours but only feasted on me. Suddenly he took me roughly by the throat of my dress, raised me and flung me back on the lounge sitting upright. He stood and looked at me, oh ! the horrible, sinister, maddened look on his face.

“Curse you !” he exclaimed, “curse you ! Love is an agony, lust a torture. Curse all women ! To love you is only to suffer. Yes !—do not look at me with those mysterious eyes of yours. Curse all women—all—do you hear me ?” His eyes glowed and glittered like those of the serpents I was using as models for my “Snake Charmer.” Suddenly he bent over me and buried his teeth in my neck. I felt no pain and sat motionless. Then he laughed—a laugh such as one fancies may be heard in hell—and went. Finally

the striking of the hour roused me. I leaned over to the table and wrote what I have written. The time is so close now! shall I have courage? Oh my God! if it should fail me! No—I dare not—I dare not live on and suffer again.

How will Raphael die? What does it matter? In a few moments this woman—*this* that is thinking—will be dead and will think no more of Raphael. Will he think of me before he dies? What does it matter? For I shall not know. Oh, the blank, the horror, the awful blank before me!

Will Svenski think more kindly of me when he knows I am out of his way?—and Ashton too? Will he marry Mrs. Herries? Poor woman! she was good! And Agatha, so grieved and sad for me, how she will weep away in her Scotch home.

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It is now indeed the last hour. Oh, the old hours! Oh, the horror of the lights reverse which showed them all to me that dreadful last day when I wrote at this table.

Now I am all broken and exhausted from the joy and agony of that last hour I have lived, which was shod with fire from hell.

Oh! what do these things matter, I shall know nothing of them. That is the same as if they did not exist. Perhaps they do not—perhaps it is all a phantasy created in the mind. Oh! the blank, the horror of death without faith! no wonder people live on and cling to some sensation—some—however little—however painful!

Ah, the clock is at twelve—I can hear something—a step in the stone street—feet coming up the stone stairway—how well I know that even, resolute step! It is Alexandre, the implacable, the demon, the benefactor. He comes to see it is done. Good-bye, my reader—there is no one else for me to say good-bye to!

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Extract from London papers of July 27th, 1889.

“Immense excitement has been caused in Paris by the unfortunate death of our great English artist, Mrs. Ashton Harcourt. She was engaged upon a large picture for the next *Salon* which had already, in its half-finished condition, excited much interest and admiration. Yesterday morning she was found dead on the couch in her studio. She had procured, as models for her picture “The Snake Charmer,” several serpents from which it was supposed the poison sacs had been removed.

Marks upon her neck, however, seem to confirm the suspicion that these serpents may have escaped from the box in which they were kept during the night, and returned to their quarters after inflicting the fatal bites, for they were found in their usual places when the attendants entered the studio yesterday morning.

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